Future Generations

By: JC303

With Eggman's passing, there is peace on Mobius, and the world renowned heroes of that time are now nothing but old legends, told by the last of that age. However, a warning from Mystic Ruins indicates that danger is coming again. Co-written with YolkaEd.

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Chapter 1

CHAPTER ONE – THINGS BEGIN

"Dear Diary,"

"Today started out as any ordinary day for the gang. For a minute this morning, I looked at my bow. I just looked at it while thinking about home again, wondering if my family misses me. Don't get me wrong, I like living with my friends here in the tree house; we call it the Clubhouse, or at least, the younger ones do."

"I remember how excited the five of them were when we finally finished building this enormous thing; Striker, Milo, Ani and Jack, and of course, Buddy. If it wasn't for the Professor, I'm not sure how much we would've accomplished doing that. What a kind-hearted man, and I feel a bit of sympathy for him because he lives all alone in that big, empty lab of his. I know he tells us that he doesn't get lonely, but I think he only says that so we don't worry about him so much. I think he really does need our company, especially since all of his own friends aren't around. Sure, there's Grandma Cream who runs the Chao Care. She tells us that all their friends are either far, far away, or they moved up to the "great beyond," and that as far as she knew, the remaining of their time were her, the Professor, and Shadow."

"Everything in the Clubhouse is alright. Milo recently had a case of the chicken pox, but he's getting over it now, and thankfully he didn't spread it to the others. He still complains about itching every now and then, but nothing as serious as before. As usual, they're just their happy, energetic selves. Wish I was that carefree…"

"I don't understand why the Professor and Shadow won't tell us anything. I look back and I see them both talking quietly behind our backs, and sometimes one of the four will say something, (because we all know a Chao can't speak), and it will draw a concerned expression from the Professor. I'm not sure if they notice it, but I don't say anything about it. Brick's noticed it too."

"But other then that, things have been…quiet. I wonder if—"

" C'MON!!! LET'S GOOOOOO! PROFESSOR WANTS TO SEE US ASAP!!!!!!"

"Or…at least it was quiet…"

Without warning, the door burst open, and five blurs barged in, jumping on the bed before she could stop them. A bear cub, a husky pup, two lions, and a purple speckled Chao were jumping impatiently over an ewe that was sitting on the bed.

"C'mon Jill!" the bear cub exclaimed. "We have to go see the Professor, and you're still in your PJs!"

"Yeah, you slowpoke!" the husky added. "C'mon! Hurry!"

"What is this? Christmas?" the ewe called Jill asked, somewhat shaken at how much her balance was being thrown off. She almost dropped her journal onto the floor.

"Silly Jill; Christmas isn't in a few months!" one of the lions said just as impatiently. One wouldn't expect him to act like this, considering that he was the older lion of the two, but still, he did so. "But the Professor can't wait a few months; we have to hurry, Jill! It's gonna be an adventure!"

Visiting the Professor was always an adventure. Jill finally uttered a laugh at their enthusiasm. "Alright, alright!" Jill giggled. "I'll get up. But you have to go bother Brick while I get dressed."

The littler lion hopped off the bed. "You promise he won't get mad?" he asked. "Last time we woke him up…he was real grumpy."

"No worries; I'll wake him up, the snoozy-head!" the older lion said enthusiastically, before he ran towards the door, fishing out a harmonica from his pocket in the process. "I'll be right back!"

The husky started snickering, "This is gonna be epic!" So she grabbed the bear and the littler lion by the wrists and dragged them against their will out Jill's bedroom door. The purple speckled chao was the last to go, as Jill pet his head.

"Good morning Buddy," she said with a smile.

"Chao," chirped the purple speckled Chao happily. Finally, he fluttered out the door, leaving Jill to close it behind them to change to more proper clothes.

…and in the meantime, the five of them snooped towards Brick's door, opening it with the slightest creaking possible. They peered into the messiest room in the tree house, with walls lined with posters of Extreme Gear, and clothes scattered all over the floor; even if all he usually wore were gloves and boots. Then the bull himself was lying on his bed with disoriented covers; snoring.

The husky tried to suppress her snickering. "Do it Jack!" she muttered.

With a nod, the older lion, Jack, put the harmonica to his lips, before he began playing an energetic tune on the instrument, and while he hadn't turned on the harmonica's microphone, since he was so close to Brick, this would likely wake the bull up.

And boy did it wake him up…

"GAH-HAH!!!" That bull jumped so quickly that he slipped out of bed and plopped onto the ground on his back, and the next thing he heard was boisterous laughter coming from his doorway.

He groaned, covering his eyes from the day light he didn't readily adjust to yet. "Is there any way that my alarm clock doesn't have to be that harmonica of yours, Jack?"

"When did you get an alarm clock, Brick?" Jack asked, as he put the harmonica away. "Anyway, Jill told us to wake you up! The Professor wanted to see us!"

Does that boy have to take everything so literally? Brick thought, grumbling to himself as he got up from the ground. Then he finally processed the info Jack told him. "Professor wants to see us huh?" he said. "What about?"

"He didn't tell us," the bear said, walking in. "But he told us that we should hurry over if we can."

"If it's so urgent, why didn't he come to us?" Brick asked crossly.

"Don't know," the husky replied. "Maybe we can ask him when we get to his lab!" Then she yanked Brick by his wrist too, bringing everyone out of his room and into the hall. "C'mon!"

Brick certainly didn't expect that, as he almost fell over himself being pulled by her. "Good grief, Ani," he muttered. "Take it easy…"

Laughing, Jack threw a glance towards Jill's bedroom for a brief moment, before looking back at the cub. "How long do you think she'll take today, Striker?" he asked.

"I hope not too long," the bear named Striker replied, "but let's check." So he went to Jill's door and was about to knock, only for the door to open suddenly, and Jill stepped out in her everyday outfit.

"All set!" Jill said, and then she followed Striker to the others, which they eventually found waiting at the end of the hall.

They all stood near elevator doors, and one of them had pressed the button for it to come.

When Brick saw Jill, he brightened up from his sour mood. "Hey," he greeted casually.

"Hi," Jill replied.

There was a ding, and then the elevator doors opened. It didn't take long for the seven of them to file in and then they made their way down. Believe it or not, their tree house had an elevator; the benefits of having a Professor help you build a tree house.

Once by the trunk of the tree outside, the doors opened and they left outside. The five little ones took off running through the jungle.

"Now to go ride the mine cart!!!" exclaimed Striker.

"C'mon! Hurry up you two!!!" the husky named Ani called back to Jill and Brick who were walking slowly behind them.

"Its okay you guys," Brick called back. "Go ahead of us. We'll catch

up."

You wouldn't have to tell them twice as the five of them raced through the jungle.

Jill laughed, "I think they're a little too excited to see the Professor."

"Well, why not?" Brick replied. "He's the world's greatest story teller with the world's greatest stories. I have to admit that's worth getting riled up over."

"True, very true," Jill remarked.

And meanwhile, the children romped through the jungle, having their race.

"I bet I could run faster than you guys!" Striker exclaimed.

"You wanna race?" Jack replied with a grin, as he picked up the pace, getting ahead of the others. "Last one there has to ask for lemonade! C'mon, Purpy, we can get there first!" he laughed, as he had been talking to Buddy.

"Chao!" exclaimed Buddy, following his lion friend.

But to their surprise, something oozing with teal blue telekinetic energy shot forward ahead of them. It turned out to be Ani, and she glanced back at them with a big grin on her face. "Well guess what guys? I can fly!" she laughed.

"Hey, c'mon Ani!" the littler lion protested as he tried to catch up with them all. "That's cheating!"

"You never said I couldn't, Milo!" Ani continued to laugh, as she went ahead.

But then, Striker grabbed Ani's foot. "If you're allowed to fly," he said, "Then I'm allowed to do this!" So as Ani flew, she carried Striker along with her.

"Hey!" Ani shouted.

"Hey, hey, hey! Wait up!" Jack called, as he began running even faster, though not enough to catch up with Ani and Striker. "If you can fly, then I can play!" he called, before taking out his harmonica, beginning to play it as he ran after the two; though as he did, he accidentally switched on its internal microphone, emitting some strong sonic waves from the instrument... not that he noticed this, mind you.

"OW!" All of them screamed, holding their ears.

"Jack!" Milo, the littler lion, cried. "THE MICROPHONE IS ON!!!" Though it was unlikely that Jack would hear him over the harmonica he played.

"Okay, Okay!" Ani screamed. "I get it! Flying is cheating!!!" Just for the sake of her own hearing, she dropped Striker and herself back onto the ground and started running again.

"CHAO!" Buddy even tried to yell since he was the nearest to Jack, and hopefully at least would hear him.

"Hn?" Jack uttered, as he removed the harmonica from his lips. "Oh, you stopped flying, Ani! Now we can win again!" he laughed, before picking up the pace, unaware of his little trick. "Remember, last one there asks for lemonade!"

Whew… Milo thought in relief. However, he wouldn't find it to be all that relieving, because when the kids all finally reached the long ladder that led up to the higher cliffs, it turned out that Milo was the last one there.

"Tough luck, Milo," Ani said.

"Aw, but I always have to ask for lemonade," Milo whined.

"Hey, don't take it so personally," Striker said. "Remember it's just a race." Buddy sat himself on top of Striker's head, as they stood there. "Well, should we go ahead and climb the ladder or wait until Brick and Jill get here?" he asked them.

"C'mon! Let's just climb the ladder!" Ani protested impatiently. "Brick and Jill always take too long!"

"Maybe it's because they never race with us?" Jack asked blissfully, as he put his hands on the back of his head. "Maybe they have a private race, or something? But the Professor wanted to see all of us, so we should probably wait for them..."

Ani started pacing around. Out of the group, she would be the first to get impatient, though it wasn't long before they spotted Brick and Jill coming out of the thick brush.

"Wow, you guys get here quick," Brick said.

"Yep," Striker said, smiling big. "And we waited for you guys!"

"Thanks," Jill said.

"Now hurry, hurry!" Ani said, being the first to start climbing the ladder. "I wanna ride that mine cart!" The last obstacle the group usually had to go through were the mines that went through the mountain. Whenever Ani was with them, she made it seem like a roller coaster ride.

Though a good deal of them enjoyed it, one of them didn't feel so confident about it.

Milo watched Ani climb the ladder nervously, and then he watched the others. Once all of them were at the top of the ladder, they each climbed into the mine cart.

"Just don't make it go so fast this time Ani…" Milo said, trembling.

"I can't promise anything!" Ani laughed, and with a wave of her hand, the mine cart began moving on its own, which caused Milo to cling to Jill for dear life.

"HERE WE GO!!!" exclaimed Striker, as they disappeared inside and closed in towards a long drop. Everyone screamed, though not out of fear. In fact, Milo was the only one screaming out of fear, as the others were enjoying it.

Especially Jack, who was raising his arms and laughing wildly. "Come on! Raise your hands, everyone!" he laughed.

Why not? Most everyone went ahead following Jack's example, that is, except Milo of course, who still held Jill dearly. Jill very well couldn't raise her hands with Milo clinging like that, as he held Milo in assurance of his safety. The mine cart was exhilarating, especially when it ran through some occasional loops. But alas, the fun could not last forever. When they all could see a bright light at the end of the tunnel, Ani did her best to try and slow down the mine cart with her powers so that their stop wouldn't be...well, abruptly uncomfortable to say the least. The cart gently slowed to a stop, just in time to touch the bumpers outside in a big field.

Everyone nearly stumbled while climbing out of the cart; Jill had to carry Milo out, because he was still clinging to her yet. "It's okay," she said to him in comfort. "We're on land now, Milo."

"Thank goodness!" he sighed, letting Jill go to stand on his own feet.

"Chao!" Buddy was a bit excited as he fluttered on ahead.

"Well, the Professor's lab should be just up the hill," Brick said, as he went ahead to follow the youngsters.

On top of the hill, a certain, slightly run-down house stood, and inside of it, an aged, two-tailed fox was drawing something on a roll of paper, his eyes deep in thought. However, when he heard laughter not too far from the house, he smiled. "There they are." he said to himself, before he stood up from his seat, walking towards the door.

When he opened it, he could clearly see the ewe, the bull, the bear, the two lions and the husky run up the stairs to meet him, and that made his smile a bit wider. They remind me a lot of Sonic, back in the day... he thought, as he waited for the children to notice him opening-

"PROFESSOR!" Jack exclaimed happily. "We're all here, now!"

Some even ran forward and gave the old fox a hug; such as Striker, Ani, and Milo, leaving Jill and Brick to continue laughing. The fox couldn't help but laugh as well, as he returned the hug just as Jack joined in the group hug.

"Hi Professor," Jill greeted.

"Yeah, how've you been lately?" Brick asked.

"Oh, the same as usual, Brick." he replied, before giving Jack a pat on the back. "Now, now, you're going to break an old man's back if you keep that up." he chuckled, which would be a prompt for them to let go. "How have you kids been, then?"

"We've been fantastic!" Jack said with a wide grin, as he let go of the fox. "The Clubhouse is still as cool as ever!"

"Well, I had the chicken pox..." Milo added unhappily, just as he scratched an itch from a reminder of that. "I'm okay now."

"So why'd you want to see us Professor?" Striker asked.

"Ooo! Ooo!" Ani said, jumping up and down. "Do we get to play with any explosives?! Huh?! Huh?! OR do we get to test out some new guns?!" But they all knew better than letting the trigger-happy husky possess firearms.

"Not today, Anistasia." the fox chuckled, as he rubbed the husky's head.

"Aw..." Ani had some high hopes on that.

"I actually wanted to speak with you of something. Why don't you all come inside?" Tails said, motioning for them to enter his house.

"That sounds like a plan!" Jack said cheerfully, as he carefully made his way past the fox, inside the building. "Are you working on something new?"

"Yeah, If you're working on something new, I'd be interested in helping out Professor," Brick commented as he and the rest proceeded inside as well. Having been the oldest out of the group, he was a bit of an apprentice to the old fox, learning all he could about technology. After all, the Professor taught Brick everything he knew about Extreme Gears.

Jill was the first to stop once inside, looking with surprise at the other

company that was leaning against the wall on the other side of the room. "Shadow?" Jill said. "I didn't know you were here."

"Shadow's here too?!" Striker asked, popping up behind Jill. "Cool!"

"Uncle Shadow!" Jack said happily, as he very nearly rushed over to hug the black hedgehog. "It's been so long since we last saw you!"

"A few months since, I'd reckon." Shadow replied, as he looked at the kids. Even for being about 120 years old, Shadow, being a construct, hadn't aged a day since those adventures several decades ago. "But let's not dwell on the past; I have urgent news, that concerns not only me and Tails, but you kids as well."

"Quite..." Tails nodded, as he sat down by his desk. "Please, by all means, make yourselves comfortable."

The little ones were quite curious about the news, so they each took their seats eagerly on the nearest seat, which was a sofa just big enough for the four of them to fit.

Brick was just fine standing, as he positioned himself next to the sofa where all the kids sat.

Jill looked back and forth between Shadow and Professor Tails *. I wonder if it was the something that they were worried about awhile ago,* she thought, waiting for either of them to speak.

As everyone sat down, Shadow cleared his throat. "Some of you may have noticed, but me and Tails... we have been withholding something from you." he said, as he pushed himself away from the wall. "Our reasons for doing so, was because at the time, it didn't seem as such a massive threat."

"Threat?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head curiously. "That's a bad thing, right?"

"Indeed..." Tails sighed, before he looked at the kids. "You all remember the stories I told you about Doctor Eggman, and how he tried conquering the world countless times?"

"Oh, yeah, the egg-belly!" Jack said, as he snickered. "For being a

bad guy, he was kinda funny some times."

"Yeah!" Ani agreed with Jack. "Too bad he's dead! I'd like to shave off that mustache of his!"

"I'm guessing these stories might have something to do with the news you're going to tell us, right?" Brick supposed.

"Yes..." Tails nodded, as he closed his eyes. "Eggman didn't work alone. He had several robotic minions doing much of his work, the most notorious being Metal Sonic, who I'm sure you know of..."

"Yeah, Tinhog!" Jack laughed. "Like that time he turned into a dragon, and-"

"This is no laughing matter." Shadow shot in, as he clenched his hands into fists. "Metal Sonic has resurfaced."

"He what?!" Brick said, no doubt completely surprised by that.

"Resurfaced? You mean he was underwater?" Ani asked cynically, meaning to joke. Though when she got a glare from Brick, she got the impression that it was not the right time and place for joking, despite having Shadow said so.

"How do you know?" Jill asked, just as shocked as the others were.

"The same way most others found out." Shadow replied, before he folded his arms and closed his eyes. "...he's sieged Westopolis, and has somehow managed to mechanize the entirety of Green Hill Zone. Later, GUN received this message, which unfortunately was televised a few hours later." Then, he took out a sphere-like object, which shone a blue light out of a projector, which showed a robot hedgehog, sitting by a desk, his hands held together.

"To all the world's citizens," the hedgehog began, as it looked up at the camera, its red eyes glowing dangerously, *"allow me to introduce myself. I am Neo Metal Sonic, known as Doctor Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik's greatest success. Though my master may be long since deceased, it doesn't mean that he took his resources to the grave with him."* Then, he stood up, as he placed his hands behind his back.

"To honor him, I have decided to take up the mantle, and try my hand at world dominance. You may have noticed, given the complete makeover the city Westopolis, and the Green Hill Zone have received. Remember this; I will remake every landmark on this planet, every city, every single solitary space, until I have completely remade it in my image. However, I am not completely heartless; if you should happen to find a champion that can best me, I might be convinced to temporarily cease my takeover. Though I doubt it; the only one who could best me is long since deceased, as well." Then, he sat down, his eyes glaring evilly at the camera. *"That's*

all for now." Then, a silvery tendril suddenly emerged from his head, and just as one could hear screams in the background, the tendril rocketed at the camera, just as it cut to static.

The entire room was silent when Shadow hid the projector on his person, with everyone looking absolutely horrified, save for Tails, who showed a look of concern. "...so... tinhog's going to..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Tails with a slightly frightened look. However, Tails didn't answer, which only served as an amplifier for the frightening tension in the room.

Milo and Buddy tried to hide behind Striker and Ani, while the four of them looked from Professor Tails to Shadow with looks of terror.

The only two that didn't express so much fear were Jill and Brick. Brick had a pretty serious look on his face, while Jill had just about the same concerned expression as Tails did. It was very unsettling, hearing something from stories just to find out how real it is. It would be like staring death in the face; probably wasn't even far off from that.

"Shadow," Brick said, "Has GUN tried to do anything about this?"

"We've tried tracing where the video may have been shot, but..." Shadow said, as he sighed. "...we've found nothing. There isn't any sort of viable trace we can use to our advantage."

"But..." Jack uttered fearfully, as he tilted his head. "...but, how is he gonna be stopped?"

"That's another thing we've kept from you..." Tails said, as he stood up, before moving to a cupboard. "While we at first only thought of it to be rumors, Shadow and I have been working to cook up something to use as a counter-measure, in case something like this would happen. And as luck would have it, I finished it yesterday." Then, opening the cupboard, he retrieved a small, circular object, which he showed to the group.

"A Chaos Radar." Shadow said, as Tails handed him the object. "It took quite a while, but using my dormant Chaos Energy, we made a radar that can single out immense hoards of Chaos Energy, including those emitting from the stones of legend..."

Jack gasped when he heard that. "The Chaos Emeralds?"

"Nobody's seen them in ages," Striker commented. "Not ever since you said your friend who was the guardian of the Master Emerald hid them in the different regions where no one could find them, Professor."

"Do you really think Metal Sonic will go after the Chaos Emeralds?" Ani asked in wondering.

"That, I cannot say." Tails said with a sigh. "However, Shadow here-" He was cut off when Shadow raised his hand, as a motion to let him speak.

"I intend to collect the Chaos Emeralds before Metal Sonic can get the chance." he then said, before looking at the kids. "Despite going against Knuckles' wishes, I cannot allow them to be used as a means to further Eggman's legacy, which is why I intend to finish it."

"Finish what?" Jack asked, but instead of giving an answer, Shadow headed towards the door, without looking back at the kids. "H-hey, Uncle Shadow!"

"Tails... thank you." Shadow said, before opening the door and leaving.

"...Shadow..." Tails uttered, before he sat down, rubbing his temples. "...you really haven't changed at all..."

"Professor, we can't let Shadow go after Metal Sonic by himself!" Striker said, running up to the old fox. "He'll get hurt!"

"Relax little guy," Brick told Striker. "I'm sure he can handle it. After everything we hear about him in the Professor's stories, I don't think he'll be done in by that mechanical menace."

"But I bet we could totally help him!" Ani threw in. "We all have amazing powers and stuff…well, except Jill maybe…" and that caused all the children to look towards the ewe.

Sure, each one in the group had their unique powers; Ani had telekinesis, Striker had an unusual knack with a baseball bat, Milo could somehow tap into ancient spirit magic for rituals, Jack had his harmonica, and Brick's nose ring could channel Chaos Energy for his usage. As far as they were concerned, Jill was a little underdeveloped in that field…

…and she never liked to talk about herself for some reason. None of the children knew her story, and never really questioned it.

"C'mon! We can't let him go up to him alone!" Ani continued to protest.

"That's just what we have to do." Tails eventually said, before he stood up. "Shadow doesn't just intend to collect the Chaos Emeralds to keep them safe from Metal... but he's going to use them to try to wipe out Metal's forces."

"Wipe out?" Jack asked, as he stood up from his seat. "How is he going to do that?"

"You all know what happens when all seven Chaos Emeralds are gathered together, right?" Tails said, as he placed his hands behind his back. "By tapping into their energies, Shadow intends to go Super, and destroy Metal Sonic once and for all. However..."

"I don't like the sound of that 'however,'" Brick remarked solemnly.

"There is one thing that Shadow failed to consider..." Tails continued, as he took a seat. "...something I tried telling him countless times, but he just wouldn't listen. The only reason Metal

didn't kill any of us back in the day, is because either Eggman kept him on a leash, or Sonic ended up stopping him. However, with both of them dead, Metal is free to be as cruel and merciless as he pleases... with absolutely no care for life."

"...is Uncle Shadow going to be alright?" Jack asked, as he looked at the others a bit worriedly.

"Shadow may hold his own against Metal, if both of them lack Emeralds... but in the meantime, I'd like you to stay in the Clubhouse, where it's safe." Tails said, as he looked at the kids.

A loud groan filled the room from all of the children.

"He's right, guys," Jill added. "The last thing we need is to jump into something that all of us aren't ready to deal with."

"But we really could help Shadow, Jill," Striker said.

"I know you guys want to help him," she said. "Trust me, I want to help him too…but Metal Sonic is…"

"Frankly guys, he's way out of our league," Brick finished for Jill when she trailed off. "It's just not smart…"

"But... what's gonna happen to Uncle Shadow?" Jack asked, as he began fidgeting.

"You shouldn't worry about it." Tails said reassuringly, as he gave them a small smile. "It may be difficult, considering what you've learned, but try not to think too much of it. Now, you should get going."

"Huh? But we just got here," Striker said.

"This blows," grumbled Ani, who was already stomping towards the door. The others were likely soon to follow, all except Jill who stayed behind.

Noticing this, Brick glanced back from the door. "Brownie, you coming?"

Hearing him, Jill looked up at him. "Uh, you guys go on ahead," she said. "I need to talk to the Professor for a minute."

Brick blinked. "Okay." Then the front door closed.

Tails blinked as well, as he looked at Jill for a moment. "What's on your mind, Jillian?" he asked.

Jill was silent at first, peering down at the ground, and then, "Well, it's something I never really told any of them, or even wrote in my diary." She looked up to him. "I'm having strange dreams. At first, I thought it was nothing, but then I eventually realized that the dreams keep coming back to me, more and more often."

Tails hummed a little when he heard that. "I see... and what happens in those dreams, Jillian?"

Jill's eyes squinted thoughtfully, staring away from him into space. "I'm walking through a thick fog," she began. "I find a pair of double doors, and when I open it, I find myself walking into a chapel. I'm walking up the isle past the pews, and I hear music, and singing voices. Only, no one was playing the organ, and there wasn't any choir. In fact, it's entirely empty. And then I look up, and I see a stained-glass mural up above, glowing with the sunshine that showed through the colors. The mural was of some sort of…angel."

Tails took this in, before nodding. "Does anything else happen, or does the dream end there?" he asked, now a little intrigued.

"It goes a little bit farther," Jill said. "I turned around and found out I wasn't alone after all. Someone was standing by the open doors, looking right back at me. I think I saw him Professor…"

Tails raised an eyebrow; *could it be one of her friends, or someone from her past* ? "Him...?" he inquired.

Tails wouldn't expect at all the answer Jill gave. "I think I saw Sonic the Hedgehog," she said.

When she gave the answer, Tails' eyes flared up, as he quickly stood up, looking at her with a shocked look. "You saw..." he uttered, before calming himself. "...Sonic... does the dream go on

beyond that?" he asked, before he sat down again.

Jill was slightly startled by his jump, so she hesitated with her answer. "He said to me, 'Nice place you got here.' 'My place?' I asked. 'Yeah' he said. 'This is your place, isn't it?' It was at that time I turned back to look up at the mural. 'Is it?' I wondered. Then when I looked back at him, he was gone."

"And that's how the dream ended," she finished.

"Hmm..." Tails mused, as he held his chin in thought. "That is very strange... and you're saying that the dreams have started to return in recent times?" he asked.

"Yes sir," Jill nodded. "And I feel like there's a message to that dream that I'm supposed to figure out…but I don't know."

"Hm." Tails nodded, as he stood up. "It may dawn upon you, eventually. If you feel like talking about further dreams you have, don't hesitate to speak with me about them." he said, before moving towards the door, opening it. "Now, hurry along; I'm sure that your friends are waiting for

you."

"Yeah," Jill said, coming to the door, but then, she stopped. "I wonder if it's implying something about me," she said, looking at the old fox again.

"...I can't tell you if that is the case. Jillian." Tails replied, before he smiled a bit. "As I said, maybe it'll come to you after a while. Now, hurry along." he said.

"I suppose so," Jill replied. "Have a good day then, Professor." And she was just leaving out the door when—

"My, my, isn't that just charming." they heard a robotic voice say, which they'd instantly recognize. Just then, Tails looked at the ground in front of Jill, and pushed her behind him; on the ground, a silvery puddle was lying dormant, shimmering. *"Still the same, even after all these years, Prower."* Then, something began slowly forming out of the puddle.

"...Jill. Run away." Tails said adamantly, as he glared at the puddle. "Now!"

Jill was so startled at what she was seeing that she was frozen. But when Tails gave the order, she refused with a shake of her head. "No! I can't leave you alone! You'll get hurt!"

"Jill, just hurry and run!" Tails yelled, without looking away from the puddle, which was slowly attaining some sort of humanoid shape. "Don't worry about me; I can handle this! Now go!"

She didn't want to, but it didn't look like she really had a choice. If whatever that thing was what she thought it was, than she wouldn't do any good. So as he strictly instructed, she ran.

Tails watched as she ran away, before returning his attention to the puddle, which now took the shape of a hedgehog. "...it's been a long time, Metal." he finally said, when Jill was out of ear's reach.

"How noble of you." the robot mused, as he folded his arms, glaring daggers with the old fox. *"Leaving yourself in danger, all for the safety of a child... it reminds me far too much of what my counterpart would have done in the past."*

Tails merely scoffed, as he folded his arms as well. "So, what is your errand here? Come to kill me?"

"That was my original intention." Metal replied. *"However, I couldn't help but overhear Shadow's little scheme... he believes that he can stop me with the Chaos Emeralds?"*

"So he does." Tails replied. "And you shouldn't underestimate him, Metal."

"When have I ever done that?" Metal scoffed, before he turned away. *"Consider yourself lucky, Prower. As payment for allowing me to know what The Ultimate Lifeform is planning, I'll spare you. Thus, you'll get to see my rule over this world, knowing that you were powerless to stop me."* Then, as he began flying away... *"But if those kids try interfering, you will be the one to blame for their passing."* Then, he vanished into the sky.

Jill didn't stop running. She ran all the way down the hill and into the field near the waterfall, heading for the mine shaft where everyone was waiting for her.

"Look! There she is!" exclaimed Ani with a point when she saw Jill come their way.

Jill came to a halt, bending over as she tried to catch her breath. "We have to do something!" she huffed frantically. "I didn't want to leave him alone, but I had no choice!"

"Whoa, Brownie!" Brick said, startled by how upset she was. "What're you talking about?!"

"The Professor!" She cried. "He's…" Jill just couldn't finish. A nagging feeling in her mind caused her to feel like she shouldn't have left at all; that she should've stayed and fought. So she spun right around and started running back.

"Jill!" Striker called. "Wait!!!" And this caused the others to follow her immediately, growing worried about what was going on.

She made it as far as the top of the stairs and then she stopped. Jill saw Tails standing all alone by his door, and it looked like he didn't have a single scratch. To this, she sighed with relief, just in time for the others to catch up with her.

"Professor!" Brick called, though just in time to realize that he appeared to be fine.

Tails, however, remained completely silent, as he still stood in that position, his eyes closed.

"...Professor?" Jack said, as he looked at Tails with a curious look. "Are you okay, Professor?"

"...Shadow..." Tails eventually uttered, before marching into his house, seemingly ignoring the kids as he closed the door behind him.

They just stood there, looking at the door in silence.

"Brownie," Brick said, turning to her. "What happened?"

"I-I swear I saw…" Jill stuttered, jittering, though she trailed off as she wiped her brow. "N-never mind. He's okay…it's just that for a minute, I thought…"

"Saw what, Jill?" Milo asked worriedly. "What did you see?!"

"No, it doesn't matter," Jill said, turning away and heading down the stairs. "Let's…get back to the Clubhouse."

Jack blinked, as he looked at Brick for a moment. "Do you think something bad happened, Brick?" he asked, as he scratched his chin with a worried look. "Both Jill and the Professor didn't seem well..."

"Yeah, they were both acting weird," Brick agreed. "I think something did happen." He stared at Tails' front door thoughtfully. "But it doesn't look like either of them will tell us what's up, Jack," He said, looking back at the lion. "Our best bet is just heading back to the Clubhouse like the Professor instructed."

Something in the skies in the distance caught his eye, which were dark, ominous clouds gathering together. "We'd better head back pretty soon too," he said. "It looks like we're going to have a big storm soon."

"S-storm?!" Milo questioned with terror. "…y-you mean like l-lightning?!"

"Yeah," chuckled Ani, seeing an opportunity to pick on Milo. "Like this— **BOOM!!!** " And that was more than enough to startle Milo, sending him scurrying right behind Striker for cover. After that, Ani was rolling on the ground laughing, up until Brick plucked her up by the ear. "OW! OW! OW!" she whined.

"That wasn't funny," Brick said. "You owe him an apology when we get back to the Clubhouse."

"Aw, killjoy," Ani grumbled, once Brick released her ear.

"It's okay Milo," Striker assured the little lion. "It's probably not as

bad as Ani makes it out to be."

"I hope so," Milo muttered.

Chapter 2

CHAPTER TWO – STANDING UP

Once getting through the mines, they were disembarking the cart when Ani felt a drip hit her nose. "Hm?" And when she looked up, more droplets came down, as the sky was now completely gray. It started to rain.

"Hurry!" Striker called out, as all of them ran through the jungle, trying to avoid getting soaked as much as possible. And thankfully it didn't take long for them to reach the trunk of the tree which held up their tree house. They all crowded into the elevator hurriedly, and as the elevator took them up the tree, they all let out sighs.

"Bummer," Striker said. "I wanted to go explore today."

"Chao," Buddy's input was that he was unhappy about being wet from the rain.

Jill, in the meantime, was silent as she was absorbed in her own thoughts. She was thankful that nothing happened to the Professor, but what she saw was very disturbing indeed. If that was Metal Sonic, then it was truly bad. Of course, the Professor had explained a lot about him to them all; how Metal Sonic absorbed the data of a water-like creature called Chaos, a monster from another story he had told them, and that he could copy the abilities of his opponents…

…and that dragon he transformed into.

The more she thought about it, the more Jill understood just how much of a menace Metal Sonic could be. She really feared for Shadow now, and for the Professor.

Brick could tell how uneasy Jill was. She didn't even notice that he was watching her, up until the elevator stopped and the doors opened to allow them into the hallway.

"Don't be not nice, Ani." Jack chimed in, as he waggled his finger at her. "Now say that you're sorry, or I'm gonna... tickle you!" Then, before either Ani or Brick could say anything, Jack began tickling the husky. "Come on, tickle-fight!" he laughed.

Ani started laughing uncontrollably while trying to wriggle away, and by then, the others had joined in tickling her. "Okay!" she laughed. "Okay! I'm sorry! Ahaha!"

However, Jack didn't stop tickling her just yet. "Now say that you're doing the dishes next week!" he laughed.

"Jack, I thought you were going to do dishes next week," Milo said, looking at him questionably.

"Alright guys, break it up," Brick chuckled. "I don't want Ani to explode because I'd have to clean her bits up off the floor." He was joking, of course.

Though he joked, it was enough to make Jack stop tickling her. "I didn't know tickling could make you explode! Does it hurt when it happens?" he asked with a dumbfounded look on his face.

"Oh yeah," Brick replied with a grin. "It hurts a lot."

Ani got up on her feet while trying to catch her breath. "I'm already hurting with all the laughing I did," she said.

"Well, since it looks like a rainy day today, why don't you four go find a board game to play or something," Brick said.

"Board game?" Jack mused, as he rubbed his chin. "Which one could we use...Striker, got any ideas?" he asked, as he looked at the young bear curiously.

"Who needs board games?" Striker said. "We can play hide-and-seek!"

Ani clapped her hands excitedly, "I like that idea!"

Brick couldn't help but smile. It was so amusing to watch them; it reminded him of when he was a kid. Course, he was mostly doing

chores as a kid, so this was a nice benefit of being older. Though what Brick would notice that the other kids certainly didn't in the midst of their craze was Jill walking off towards her room. He looked at the kids one last time, and left them on their own to play their games while he followed Jill.

"Hide-and-seek? Sounds fun!" Jack laughed, before he tapped Milo on the head. "Then Milo's it!" he said with a grin, before running down one of the halls, intent on finding a hiding spot.

"What? Hey!" Milo shouted, but before he knew it, the others split off looking for hiding spots too, leaving Milo alone in the hall. "Aw man," he moaned. "Well, better get to counting…" So he hid his face against the wall and began counting.

"You okay?"

Jill turned around from her door to see the bull approach her. "Oh, Brick," she said.

"You've been awfully silent," Brick said. "And you don't look so well."

Jill turned away from him as she entered her room, with Brick coming in before she closed the door. Then she leaned against the door while looking up at him. "I'm not sure if I was ever so scared in my life," she said.

"What do you mean?" Brick asked her.

Jill paused a minute, listening through the door to make sure that there wasn't any of the youngsters right on the other side. "After I talked to the Professor, I saw something," she said. "And…I think it was Metal Sonic."

"What?!" Brick was so shocked he nearly fell backwards, though thankfully he remained on his feet. Then he went right up to her. "You sure?! If it was him, than the Professor would've been…"

"Exactly," Jill said. "But he's fine."

"That's why you were so worked up earlier," Brick said.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of them," Jill said. "They were frightened enough when Shadow told us the news…"

"You're such a mom," Brick chuckled.

Jill looked at him. He usually said that phrase whenever she was worried about their welfare, and in a way, he was sort of right. It was a bit irritating whenever he said that, and Jill wished that he wouldn't. Seeing the look Jill gave him only made Brick chuckle more, as he turned and walked around her room.

"You're always picking on me," Jill said.

"Ani picks on Milo, why not?" Brick said. "Besides, it'll get your mind off things. You worry too much."

"Brick, I'm just not in a joking mood," Jill said, sitting down on her bed. "I have too many things to think about right now."

"You're so reserved Brownie," Brick said to her, sitting down next to her. "If you just opened up a little bit more, maybe you wouldn't have to think so hard. You seem so afraid to tell us something in case it might "hurt us." You won't even tell us about yourself." Then he looked at her. "The Professor and Shadow keep enough secrets from us. You don't really have to share their burden you know…"

"I know, I know," Jill said. "It's just that there are things I'm not sure about myself, and…well, you know, I'm just trying to figure them out."

"Well, don't stress yourself out too much, you hear?" Brick said, giving her a pat on the back before he rose to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to check on their little game; just to make sure Ani didn't break anything. You look like you need a little time by yourself."

"Yeah, alright," Jill said. "Maybe I'll even take a little nap. I probably didn't get enough sleep."

"Good idea," Brick said. As he opened the door, he shot Jill a smile.

"Just take it easy, girl. I'll keep an eye on them for you."

"Thanks Brick," Jill said, replying the same smile.

Brick gave her a friendly wink. "No problem," he said, and that was the last of it as he closed the door behind him.

Jill lay down on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. She knew he was right about worrying so much, and to be honest, she was a regular worrywart. Being the oldest girl in the group of kids, she felt it was her responsibility to look after them all. Her role really was like a "mom" as Brick joked about.

So she lay there, worrying.

She had calmed a bit since what she saw when she was with the Professor, probably due to the fact that she was indeed feeling a little drowsy. She was much too tired to really think any farther.

For awhile, she had been on a secret, personal journey to discovering the unknown elements of her own past, unbeknownst to everyone except the Professor. Like when she confessed of her dream, she had told him of her troubling past, hoping that he could help her figure out the answers to her questions. So far, nothing much has been gained.

But this dream served to be a breakthrough; Jill had a feeling in her gut. Was there something in her subconscious that was trying to reach her? Maybe, but why Sonic? Why did she see him?

But she was tired, so she decided not to think about that anymore.

"Professor, Shadow, please don't do anything to get hurt," she murmured, and shortly enough, her eyelids fell as she drifted away into slumber.

Laughing, Jack was quick to find the first door he could find, quickly slipping into the room beyond it, as it turned out to be a bedroom. "Striker and Purpy's room..." he mused, before quickly hiding himself under the bed, taking cover under the sheets.

Though he would find once he climbed under that he was nose to nose with Striker. "Aha!" he said. "You found me! Too bad you're not it!"

"Chao!" added Buddy.

"Aw, I found you without being it!" Jack chuckled, before shushing both himself and Striker. "But we gotta be quiet, or Milo's gonna find us..."

"Ready or not, here I come!" called out Milo's voice from outside the bedroom door. The footsteps passed by the door and vanished away, and for a while, it was silent, but then the steps eventually returned to the door, and then they'd hear it open. "I'm gonna find you guys!" he said, even if he was unaware of where they were.

His eyes widening, Jack silently placed his hands over his mouth, in order to not make any loud noise that would alert Milo to their presence.

"Where are yooooou?" Milo sang, as he looked through the closet.

"Aw! You found me!" called out a voice, which turned out to be Ani. She crawled out of the closet, covered in coats, and once she was on her feet, she tossed the coats back into the closet.

"You get to be it!" Milo laughed.

"Only if you can find the rest of them," Ani said.

Suddenly, the covers were pulled up, and Striker and Jack looked up at Milo, who smiled. "Found the rest of them!!!" he exclaimed.

"Hey! We all hid in the same room!" Striker laughed.

"Isn't that just crazy?" Jack laughed, as he crawled out from under the bed, before stretching out. "Ready for round 2, guys? Ani's gonna be it, this time around!"

"Aw!" Ani whined. "Okay fine, but—"

"Hey guys, what'cha up to?" All the kids turned to see Brick at the

doorway, looking at them with an amused smile.

"We're playing hide and seek!" Striker said. "And now Ani's it!"

"Aaand..." Jack said with a grin. "...do you think you could play with us, Brick? Maybe we can get you to be it after Ani's done!" he laughed.

Brick let out a laugh, "Yeah right! Okay, I'll play!" Although, before anyone could move, there sounded a ground shaking boom that came from outside, which was plenty enough to make everyone jump; especially Milo and Buddy who let out yelps and grabbed each other.

Then, the room fell to pitch darkness.

"Don't tell me the power went out," groaned Brick, who rubbed his eyebrows in annoyance. "C'mon guys, we'd better find those lanterns…"

I found myself walking through the fog again. It was so thick that I couldn't see anything but the very ground I walked on. Even though it was somewhat futile though, I felt compelled to keep walking, wondering where I was and where I would take myself. Though this time, I did not come to the double doors of the chapel as I have once before.

As I continued, I came across trees, and grass, and ferns, and I kept walking until the fog eventually cleared away little by little. Then, I found myself in the jungles of Mystic Ruins, but it seemed like an unfamiliar area of it. I walked farther and farther until I eventually encountered a stone arch. Past it was a clearing, and what I saw made my jaw drop in amazement.

It was a temple from the looks of it; a pyramid shape that was tall and had something of a tower near its tip. There was a long case of stairs that led up to its entrance up high, with a couple of statues beside its foot; the statues resembling echidna warriors.

What was more was that there were two vague figures standing at

the bottom of the stairs, looking at my direction. As I drew closer, I started to see who they were, and I even realized that they were smiling at me.

" *Greetings Jillian, and welcome." They were both echidnas, and the one that had spoken was the orange one who appeared to be a girl. She wore tribal garb, with jewelry and bandaged locks, and sandals. "We've been expecting you."*

"*… you have?" I asked them.*

The other echidna nodded, which was a tall, red male echidna with somewhat of a strong build. I could feel his violet-colored eyes pierce into me, and I felt an impression of ancient power that almost made me fear, but there was a hint of comfort that allowed me to look back at him, eye-to-eye.

The two of them…their features I could somehow recognize, in the sense that their description had been told to me before…

Before I could question any farther, the echidnas turned and began making their way up the stairs.

" *Huh?! Wait!" I called out, starting off in a run after them to catch up.*

" *Come inside," spoke the red echidna, bearing quite a masculine voice. "We could use your help with something…" and by the time I had actually caught up with them at the top of the stairs, they faded away and disappeared like magic; as if they never really existed at all…*

… and I found myself looking at the entrance of the temple, looking deeply at it. Then it suddenly dawned on me that I recognized this temple. "This is—!"

"Jill!"

Jill's eyes popped open and she shot up in her bed to find the gang all in her room, holding lanterns that lit up the darkness in her room. Milo was right next to her, and Jill figured that he was the one that woke her up.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"The storm got so bad that the power went out," Striker answered, and just to confirm that, there was a boom of thunder that came from outside, along with the rain pattering loudly on the roof.

"Hrm... I don't like it when it gets dark..." Jack sighed, as he looked at the lantern he held. "I wonder how the Professor is doing at his own house."

"Yeah, I hope he's okay," said Ani.

"The Professor's probably been through worse than a storm guys," Brick assured. "He'll be okay."

Jill was still entranced by the recent dream she had, and she immediately got up from her bed to the window, staring outside as a waterfall of rain came pouring down the glass from outside.

"Jill?" Milo said.

The longer Jill looked out there, the stronger a small feeling inside of her grew. Her eyes looked through the trees as if it was searching. She could almost imagine her gaze piercing through the tree tops as she looked. By then, something came to her. Her feeling grew ever so strong.

"There it is…" she muttered.

"There it is? What is it Jill?" Striker asked.

Jill pushed the kids aside while coming to a cabinet in her room, and when she opened it, it revealed her beautiful, white bow which bore green jewels here and there. None of them have ever seen it before, and what more; the bow string looked almost as if it were woven out of pure gold.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Striker.

"Wow..." Jack uttered, as he looked at the bow with wide eyes. "It's... so shiny..." he said with a smile on his face. "That is so cool..."

Not even Brick had seen it before; as he looked at it with widen eyes. He watched as Jill reached for it and set it over her shoulders. "Brownie, what are you doing?" he finally asked, just as she went back to her window again.

She didn't answer at first, as she proceeded to open her window. A strong gust forced its way into the room with a shower of mist for the children, and Jill climbed right out into the storm.

"Brownie?!" Brick shouted, running to the window to see her go to the zip-line that was on a nearby platform near her window. All the children tried to push through to look at Jill as well, and as she turned to them, lighting flashed in her background.

"Keep them safe in the Clubhouse, Brick," Jill said. "I'll be right back." And with that, she jumped to allow the zip-line to take her down, down, down into the trees below, where she disappeared from their sight.

"Jill!" Ani called out, though her call was drowned out by more thunder.

"Jill!" Jack called, as he watched Jill descend down the zip-line, before he looked at Brick. "Brick, what's Jill doing? She's going to catch a cold in this weather!"

As Brick watched where she had gone, he wondered thoughtfully. "I don't know what's gotten into her, but I'm wondering if what happened with the Professor and her is making her act this way…"

"If that's the case, then maybe we need to go tell the Professor!" Striker said. "Maybe he'll know what to do!"

"...let's do it, then!" Jack said, as he began stretching out. "If the Professor can help Jill, then we should let him know what's going on right away!"

"Yeah!" the others agreed with Jack, all except Brick who looked at them.

"I'm not sure," Brick said. "I know both the Professor and Jill told us to stay here, and that storm isn't any better…but what the heck. I'm

worried about her, and we can't leave anyone behind!"

"Then let's go!!!" exclaimed Ani, as she and the others started off out Jill's bedroom door.

The rain did nothing to stop her as she swept past all the brush, and being soaked didn't bother her one bit. Her senses were suddenly heightened at measures that they hadn't gone in a long time…for the first time in a long time, Jill nearly forgot and began to feel like an older self that had been in deep sleep all this time.

She could feel it…a type of power that was calling to her through her sense.

It wasn't long at all before she began trailing into the part of the Mystic Ruins that she began to connect with to the area in her dream, and fortunately enough, she found that stone arch. She stopped into the open area, and again with a surprised look, she gazed to see that tall temple standing through all the blistering winds and rain.

When she tried to regain her breath, she also noticed a figure standing at the bottom of the stairs. It wasn't either of the echidna's though, like it was in her dream, but it was definitely a figure she recognized. She called out before she could stop herself, "Shadow!"

Turning his head, the black hedgehog glanced at Jill. "...Jillian." he said, before he looked back up at the temple. "What brings you here?"

Jill walked on up beside Shadow, looking at the temple as well. "Something called to me," she finally said. "I know it sounds weird… but it's true." And the more she looked at it, that feeling inside kept stirring stronger. At last, she finally figured out what it was…

"There's a Chaos Emerald in there, isn't there?" she said suddenly.

"Yes... there's no mistaking it." Shadow nodded, as he began walking up the stairs. "Go home, Jillian; likely, Metal Sonic is on his way here as we speak."

Jill stood there a moment, watching him go up the stairs in disdain. But something inside her told her to toughen up, and she marched up the stairs after him as fast as she could, trying to stop him. "No," she said. "I know it's dangerous, but all the more reason that you shouldn't go alone."

Shadow didn't answer.

"Believe me Shadow, you don't know where I've been," and when she said that, thunder sounded. "So what gives you the right to treat me like a child?" she asked him sternly. Normally, Jill wouldn't be this stubborn, but there were a lot of things driving the girl right now.

However, she wouldn't expect Shadow to spin around and suddenly grab her by the shoulder, glaring at her. "The fact that you are inexperienced in combat and the fact that you would be mercilessly slaughtered by Metal Sonic within seconds." he growled, before letting go of Jill. "How do you think Tails would feel if you were to die at Metal's hands? Or your own friends, for that matter? I will not have anyone's life on my conscience. So go home, Jillian." Then, he turned away from her, continuing to advance up the stairs.

"You think…I'm inexperienced in combat?!" Jill screamed, growing furious. "I'm more experienced in combat than you think! I fought and killed a freakin vampire single-handedly and—!" By then, Jill clamped her hands over her mouth to stop herself. That was too much information; because that was trailing into her past that she had so strictly kept secret. Again, thunder clashed.

However, Shadow didn't bother looking back at her. "I could care less if you killed an abominable snowman; Metal Sonic is not one you would want to face. Now get yourself back home and leave this to me," he said, with clear restraint in his voice, as he entered the temple.

Jill didn't have any other way to stop him or try to help, allowing him to enter the temple without any more disturbances. She stood there, getting soaked more and more from the pouring rain, and she looked up at another lightning bolt that snapped at her. "How do you think I feel Shadow?" she said to herself sadly. "If you died…"

Something Shadow had told her was to never let emotions motivate your actions, and like they had grown close to the Professor, she and the others were fond of Shadow. Despite how devastated she and the group would be of his death, she also knew that if he was killed, then there wouldn't be anyone capable to stand up to Metal Sonic. She tried to remind herself what she had heard the hedgehog could do. Taking down an entire race of aliens certainly proved just how destructive he could be. By doing this, she tried to convince herself that she really should return home, and that she might have been overreacting…

…but it didn't work. She recalled what she heard Metal Sonic could do. If he could repeat whatever actions Shadow could do, combined with copied abilities of others, then even the Ultimate Life Form might not last against that kind of power. Professor Tails himself admitted that they were able to defeat him because he worked together with all his friends when they faced the Metal Overlord.

It went without saying that Jill felt conflicted. She pulled her bow out, looking at it. "Please," she said, almost as if talking to it. "I need your power again…I don't know what I did to make you abandon me long ago, but I need it back to help my friends." No response, but a cackle of lightning. "You brought me here didn't you?" she said. "I'm supposed to do something here…that dream wasn't just a dream. They have a meaning, I know they do. After all the things that I've seen, I know that I can't be exaggerating."

Jill felt something tugging on her feelings all of a sudden, and it was pulling her up the stairs. Becoming a bit hopeful, she followed this feeling up the stairs, but as she was about to enter the entrance before her, she felt that tug pull her somewhere else; like *around* it. Without questioning, she pursued this strange sense she felt, up until she was on the completely opposite side of where the entrance was.

There were two stone slabs that were locked closed together on the platform that she stood on, and though it was pretty obvious, no one probably would have thought to look back here. "A back entrance?" Jill wondered.

Then they miraculously opened out, revealing a small stone shaft

that evidently led into the temple. Jill just stared at this in disbelief. "How…convenient," she muttered. Well, now was the ultimate choice; go, or run back?

Jill hadn't felt her senses stimulate like this since long before she had met all her friends and built that tree house. This was a sure sign that something was going on.

Her powers were somehow returning…powers she thought that she had lost for good.

Without further ado, she hopped into the shaft just in time for the stone slab doors to close above her, cutting off the rain that was pouring on her and putting her in pitch darkness. She went ahead crawling through the shaft, seeing just where it would take her.

"Professor!!!" cried Striker, as he was banging on the front door when he got there.

But Ani decided she didn't want to wait for the old fox to answer, because she shoved Striker out of the way and barged through the door. "Professor!" she called in, just as the rest of them entered inside.

"Wh-what's wrong?" When they barged into the house, they would see Tails sitting by his desk, a lit candle placed by him, and a cup of coffee in his hands. "Running over here in this storm... don't tell me that somebody's hurt?"

"Someone could get hurt!" Jack said quickly, as he pushed past Ani. "Jill had this really fancy bow, and then she went into the jungle, and the bow was really shiny, and she could catch a cold, and-"

"Wait, hold on..." Tails uttered, as he stood up, looking at the group. "...did you say that Jill took out a bow?" he said, a look of disbelief on his face.

"Yeah, and then she just got up and left," Striker said.

Brick walked up to Tails with an inquiring look. "Professor, do you

know what's going on?" he asked.

"...I both do and don't." Tails sighed, as he sat down by his desk, holding his head. "Oh, that it should come to this... you five don't know about her past, do you?" he asked.

"She never told us anything," Milo said, tilting his head curiously. "But what does her past have to do with…?"

Brick looked more concerned. "What happened, Professor?" he urged.

"Quite a lot..." Tails sighed. "It may not seem like it, but Jillian... she harbors a mighty power within her. It has been dormant for quite some time, but lately, Jill has had dreams... it may be a sign that-"

"Wait, she harbors a power?" Jack asked. "But... when did Jill become a harbor?"

"That's not what I meant..." Tails sighed, as he rubbed his temples. "We can't waste much time. Tell me, do you know where she ran to?"

"She headed deeper into the jungle," Brick said. "I can't imagine why she'd do that unless…" it just occurred to him that moment, "… there's that temple."

"As I suspected..." Tails muttered. "...normally, I would have told you to get to the clubhouse, but frankly, I can't take that risk. Brick, I trust that you will take care of them."

"Wait..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Tails. "...does this mean that-"

"It does. I want you to hurry to that temple, and find Jill before she winds up in trouble." Tails replied, just as another clap of thunder occurred.

However, when that clap died out, they would hear a sound reminiscent of jets fly right over them. "What was that?" Jack mused. "Some sort of flying routine?"

At that moment, however, Tails' eyes widened. "No, not now!"

Shaking his head, he looked at Brick. "Listen, you have to go get her, quickly!"

"But what was that?!" Milo asked fearfully.

Brick observed the expression on the Professor's face, and knew that he had to hurry. "Let's hustle like the Professor said guys," he said. "We have to get to Jill before something bad happens to her!"

"We can't let something bad happen to her!" Jack said, as he quickly grabbed Striker's and Milo's wrists. "Hang on, Jill; we're gonna save you!" he said, as he rushed out the door... only to peek back in moments later. "Where's that temple again?"

Brick smacked his forehead. "I know where it is," he said. "C'mon, I'll lead the way."

Within the temple, Shadow walked cautiously around, his eyes scanning the architecture for anything suspicious. Holding the radar in his hand, Shadow saw that the signal was getting stronger. "I'm getting closer..."

"Fascinating technology. I should invest in that." All of a sudden, Shadow felt something behind him, and jerked his head away, just as a silverly tendril narrowly passed by him. *"Oh... even without a Chaos Emerald, you're as quick as ever, Shadow."*

Growling, Shadow looked back at where the tendril had come from, to be met with a blue, robotic hedgehog. "Metal Sonic." he spat, as Metal retracted the tendril. "Come to find the Emerald?"

"That's a main priority of mine." Metal said nonchalantly. *"Another priority of mine, at the moment... is to see you dead."* Then, he flew right at Shadow, intending to punch the black hedgehog.

However, Shadow easily avoided this attack, before he began skating away from Metal. "Think you can catch up with me?" he called, just as Metal flew after him. However, when he did that, Shadow quickly changed his path, headed towards where the signal

was getting stronger. Despite that, Metal kept chasing after him.

Jill was making her way through a long stone corridor, and she watched carefully for the booby traps. Fire suddenly spat out from the walls, and she leaped effortlessly over them. "Wow, that river dancing is paying off," she said to herself, running just on the tips of her toes for added speed, while following that strange sensation that was tugging on her senses, pulling her the direction she was going.

She found herself out on a perch up high, overlooking a large area of water with a waterfall, and the walls were moving in different places and glowing. Just everything about the mysteries of this temple made her stop and look in awe. "This place is alive!" she said.

And while peering down, she was able to catch two figures coming out from another hall, and luckily they were much too far to see Jill. Realizing that it was Shadow and Metal, she tried to suppress a gasp, "Is that really…?!"

"Why won't you just perish?" Metal growled, as he sent a series of tendrils flying at Shadow, though the hedgehog was quick enough to avoid them.

"I won't until I know that you disappear as well!" Shadow replied, as he looked ahead of him. *The Emerald... its close-by,* he thought, as he kept a good distance between him and the metal hedgehog. "What hole did you crawl out of, anyway?"

"That is none of your concern, 'Ultimate Lifeform'." Metal responded quite curtly, just as more tendrils shot out from his body, aimed at Shadow.

It doesn't look like he's having any trouble right now, Jill thought as she watched them. But she felt that mental tug still, as it directed her to a large stone switch. She felt compelled to press it, and she did without thinking, which caused a lot of the walls to shift. They shifted until they made a path for her, leading down into some sort of stone box, which Jill could barely see that it led through another tunnel. It was there that her senses were pulling her.

She took one last look at the two hedgehogs to see they were too absorbed with each other to even notice her, so she went ahead scaling the walls. It was very awkward, as the shift of gravity from the walls allowed her to walk on it, but at her perspective, she saw Metal and Shadow on a wall rather than the floor. Very strange indeed; she almost felt a little dizzy, up until she finally made it into that stone box without being detected.

It grew much, much stronger now, as she ran down the tunnel. Eventually, she came to a very small case of stairs, leading up into a master chamber. As she walked forward past giant stone pillars that were lined up, she looked ahead. On the wall across from where she was, there were large pictures. They were hieroglyphics of some sort, and the more Jill stared at them, the more she realized they were of a giant beast. Furthermore, she recognized the beast.

"Chaos," she gasped in amazement.

And when she peered down to her level, she was even more surprised. There, standing on a pedestal, was a brilliant-cut, green jewel of amazing size. All her senses were directed right at it, as she could catch an immense power coming off of it. "Oh my…" she breathed, walking up to it and taking it up with her hands. "Is it…is it really a Chaos Emerald?!" she murmured, looking at it.

At that moment, however, something was sent hurling right through the walls of that chamber, skidding to a halt right by Jill. "Guh... I got careless..." this figure uttered, as he stood up, showing that it was Shadow.

"I wouldn't say that." Metal's voice rang, as he slowly approached the hole Shadow had created from being flung through it. *"It's not so much carelessness, as it is age. Your body may not show it, Shadow, but you are getting old."* Then, as he got a clear view of the two, he noticed what Jill held. *"Well, now... we seem to have a tomb raider among us."*

As he said that, Shadow finally realized that Jill was standing right behind him, with the Chaos Emerald in her grasp. "...what are you doing here?" he uttered, before looking back at Metal, who simply folded his arms.

Jill shook her head. "See, I knew this was going to happen," she said to Shadow, and then she looked at Metal. "So you're Metal huh? My name's Jill."

Then a weird look came across her face. "Ever think of taking up a more worthwhile hobby, like sculpting? I'm sure it would make a better living than ruling the world."

"Ah, our little raider has wit." Metal chuckled, as he pointed a finger at her. *"Charming; it makes killing you seem a bit sour."*

"Sh- get down!" Before Jill could react, Shadow pulled Jlll down to the ground, just as a tendril shot right out of Metal's finger, embedding itself in the wall, mere inches from having pierced Jill's skull. "Damnit, Jill... what did I tell you?" he growled, before he looked at Metal, his fists closing. "He's gonna kill you without hesitation. You would be wise to give me the Emerald, and just run."

"Oh, but I can't let her just walk off alive, now, can I?" Metal mused, as he cracked his neck. *"She got involved in things that do not concern her... and I told Prower that if they interfered, the children's lives would be on his conscience. So, nothing personal, Jill, but you'll have to die."*

"Well that's too bad," Jill said, as she tossed the Chaos Emerald to Shadow. "I was hoping to get to know you more." *C'mon…* she thought, as she drew out her bow. "Don't put the burden on them though," she said, as she began to twirl something around in her free fingers. "I take full responsibility for my own death."

She was glad to see that there was an actual golden arrow in her fingers, and to this, she smiled. *It really is coming back,* she thought.

Then in a snap, she had pulled the bowstring back and shot it at Metal with incredible velocity.

"Wha...?" Shadow uttered, as he saw the golden arrow shoot towards the robotic hedgehog...

...only for it to harmlessly bounce away before it could even hit him, as a shimmer of black energy appeared in the air where the arrow

had bounced away. " *Oh, don't tell me that you thought I came here unprepared?* " Metal chuckled, as he raised his hands. " *How did you think that I could locate a Chaos Emerald, without one of my own? Now, it's time for you to-* "

"Chaos Lance!" All of a sudden, a bolt of Chaos Energy was hurled at Metal, and while the black barrier disintegrated the blast, the sudden impact made Metal skid backwards. "Jill, you're to leave this place right now!" Shadow called, as he glared at Metal, holding the Emerald ready. "I'm in control, now."

" *Are you, now?* " Metal chuckled, as all of a sudden, the entire room was coated in silvery metal, closing off the exits, and effectively trapping Jill and Shadow in that room. " *Silly Shadow; you have lost your touch. Oh well; you can at least greet Eggman when you meet him in the afterlife.* "

Jill became a bit uneasy about that, but she didn't show it. In fact, she kept a smile on her face. *I can feel it* , she thought. *I can't believe it's actually coming back!* "Why don't you trust me Shadow?" she asked the black hedgehog. Her bow began to resonate with a white glow, and as she pulled the bow string, a glowing arrow of energy appeared in place. "Don't think that I'm stupid Metal," she said. "I've dealt with somebody who uses the same cheap tricks. True, he was much weaker than you, but that doesn't mean I can't step up to a challenge."

Once she released the arrow, the impact was more devastating than Metal had expected, as the barrier shattered around him. However, he merely chuckled. " *Oh, my nanotechnology is cheap, now?* " he mused, as he cracked his knuckles. " *Believe me, Jill, when I say that I have far cheaper tricks up my sleeves; tricks that might seem fami-* " Then, he suddenly froze in place.

"That should buy us some time..." Shadow uttered, as he was holding the Chaos Emerald before him, having used it to freeze Metal's time, so to speak. "...Jillian, it's not that I don't trust you." he eventually said, before closing his eyes. "But... I promised myself when I set out to destroy Metal Sonic that no one should have to die in my place. Especially not one so young..." Then, he folded his arms. "In any case, I got what I wanted. We should leave, Jillian,

before he breaks free."

"Well, since you made it possible now," Jill said, replacing her bow back upon her shoulders. "Shadow, I know I'm young, but the Professor started much, much younger than I did, and I've had my own secrets I've hidden from everyone." Then she looked at Shadow deeply. "I pledge loyalty to those who need my help, regardless if they want it or not. You needed my help."

"You pledge...?" Shadow uttered, as he looked at Jill with some curiosity. "...just who are you, anyway?" he asked, when he threw a glance back at Metal. "Look, this can wait. Metal will be sure to begin hunting you down, so unless you wish to endanger your friends... I suggest that you go into hiding, until I can finish Metal off."

"Alright," Jill said. "I anticipated as much anyway. Looks like our Clubhouse won't be safe anymore…c'mon." With that, she started off back towards the exit-

-until Shadow grabbed hold of her shoulder. "Did you forget? Metal may be frozen, but his chrome steel barrier is still blocking us out."

"Oh yeah, my bad," Jill chuckled nervously. "Nearly forgot."

Then, he closed his eyes, as the glow of the Chaos Emerald grew stronger. "I'll have us out soon enough." Then, both of them suddenly vanished, leaving the frozen Metal alone in the chamber.

Chapter 3

CHAPTER THREE– THINGS CHANGE

"Hurry!!!" Ani screamed, who was ahead of the group as she ran through the jungle.

Though in a split second, Ani had passed by a blinding flash of light, and the moment she turned around, she witnessed all the others running right into two figures. Brick and Striker had run into Jill, while Jack and Milo crashed into Shadow. "Oh my god!!!" Ani exclaimed, as she jumped onto Jill as well. "You're alright!!! Thank god!"

"Help…" uttered Jill. "I'm being…crushed."

"Whoops! Sorry!" Brick said, getting up quickly and pulling Ani and Striker off of her.

"Jill! And Uncle Shadow!" Jack exclaimed happily. "You're alright! And you guys don't have a cold, or anything!"

"Hm." Shadow scoffed, as he got Jack and Milo off him, before brushing dust off his arms. "You know what you have to do, Jill." he said curtly, before turning from the group, walking away. "See you later."

"...what's wrong with Uncle Shadow?" Jack hummed, when Shadow was out of ear's reach.

Jill watched as Shadow left, with a serious look on her face. Once he left, she turned to the others. "Guys," she said. "We can't go back to the Clubhouse."

"What?" Striker said. "Why?"

"I'll tell you later," she said. "But right now, we need to go see the Professor really quick, and then we need to board the train. Hopefully, we can get the Professor to come with us."

"Well, let's not wait around!" Jack said, as he pointed towards the Professor's house. "If this is something very serious, then we can't waste time!"

"Right!" all the other children agreed, as they headed off right back in the direction they had been running from. Jill remained behind the entire group as they ran, watching behind them to see if Metal Sonic ever came up behind them.

Brick watched her as he ran, in disbelief at her sudden change of behavior. He never saw Jill so…solemn. Recalling what the Professor had said earlier, he wondered just what had happened in her past, and why she might've kept it a secret from them.

They were lucky enough to reach that mine cart safely, so far with no sight of Metal Sonic. The kids all climbed in the cart immediately, and just as Ani got it going, Jill hopped in at the last minute. "Go as fast as you can Ani!" she said.

"Okay!" she replied, much to Milo's disdain.

Not long at all did they reach the other side, and they headed up the stairs as fast as possible. The storm was still going, so all of them were soaked heavily by now as they reached Tails' house.

Of course, they went ahead and opened the door this time without even knocking, allowing everyone in before Brick closed the door.

When Tails saw the kids enter, a wave of relief flushed over him. "Oh, you're all safe... thank goodness..."

"Professor, there's no time! It's really serious, so we got to get to the train!" Jack exclaimed, before he suddenly calmed himself. "...why was it serious again?"

Jill turned around, looking at each of the kids before she looked the Professor straight in the eye. "We need to leave," she said. "And we have to take you with us. It's not safe anymore Professor. Metal Sonic will be looking for us."

The entire room was shocked.

"Did you just say that Metal Sonic's looking for us?!?!" screamed Milo as he bit his nails.

Jill nodded, while peering down at the ground shamefully. "Shadow encountered him in the temple, and he would've been in trouble if I hadn't helped Professor."

"Hrm... I should have expected that..." Tails muttered, as he held his arms behind his back. "He did threaten my life earlier today..."

"Wait, why would he do that?" Jack asked in disbelief. "I mean, you're the nicest guy I know, along with Uncle Shadow, Brick, Striker, Purpy and Milo! Jill and Ani don't really count, 'cuz they aren't guys, but they're nice, too."

"Never mind that, Jack." Tails said, as he placed a hand on the lion's shoulder, before looking at Jill. "And Shadow? Where is he now?"

"He left with the Chaos Emerald in his possession," Jill said. "He somehow used it to freeze Metal in time, but I don't know how long it'll last. It managed to give the two of us time to escape from the temple."

"I see..." Tails mused, before he pointed at Brick and Ani. "If he used Chaos Control, then we can expect at least ten minutes before Metal breaks loose. In that time, I need you two to help me take along a few things before we can leave." he said, just before he began taking some blueprints, and placing them as quickly as he could in a bag.

"That still doesn't leave us with much," Jill remarked. "It took us about two minutes to get away."

"All the more reason to hurry up," Brick said. "Just tell us whatever you need Professor."

"I don't need a whole lot..." Tails replied, as he kept on taking blueprints and placing them in bags. "I'll need my tools, some gadgets, blueprints, and..." He trailed off, when he stopped by a drawer, which had several frames with photos of many different characters lying on it, a much younger Tails being one of those on

the photos. "...these."

All the kids couldn't help but look at those, but they only had a quick glance before Ani used her telekinesis to take them, and a bunch of other things that he named and put them into the bag. Brick left the room into other places in order to gather whatever gadgets he felt that Tails might need. Some of the other kids even helped to speed up the process.

Eventually, they had gotten just about everything Tails needed, and it was time to leave. "Tell me, children; have you ever ridden the train?" Tails asked them, as he and the kids were ready to leave the workshop.

"I have," said Ani, raising her hand. "I did a lot of traveling before I met you guys, so yeah."

"And you know I have Professor," added Brick. It was likely, since he had sometimes been sent on some errands by Tails which required a train ride or two.

Jill opened the door and stepped out of the workshop first, to check and see if the coast was clear. Thankfully, nobody was outside, neither friend nor foe. "We should hurry; he might show up any minute, now." Tails said, as he began moving out of the house.

Everyone nodded, and then they moved out carefully. Luckily, the storm was beginning to die down so there was no more lightning, and the rain was a little easier this time. The group marched down the stairs one by one and they ran across the field following the Professor. They reached a flight of stairs that led up to a wooden platform, with a sign hanging over it that said "Mystic Ruins Train Station."

"I'm going to miss the Clubhouse," Milo said, as they walked up the stairs to the station.

"Yeah... it's gonna take a while before we can go back there, right?" Jack asked, as he gave out a sigh.

"It depends on when Shadow can defeat Metal... but don't worry;

we'll likely get a chance to return." Tails mused, as they eventually got to the top of the stairs, reaching the train platform, where a train awaited them.

And as the doors opened, the kids proceeded to gather inside and find their seats. The last that hesitated were Jill and Tails, as she turned to him. "Professor," she said. "You might've been able to assume this, but...my power returned."

"I had a feeling that it was the case..." Tails sighed, before placing a hand on Jill's shoulder. "We can talk about this later. For now, let's get to Station Square ; it'll be safer there."

"Yeah," Jill replied with a nod, as she and Tails embarked the train. Shortly after they found their seats near the others, the train closed its doors and started off. It was quiet on the train, as they seemed to the only ones in the car.

At last, Jill looked up at all of them. "I think I owe you guys an explanation," she said.

Jack blinked, as he looked at Jill. "Explanation? You mean about the shiny bow, and everything?"

"Jack, I think it would be better if we all allowed Jill to say what she has to say." Tails said, before he looked at Jill. "Go on."

"Well, I've been hiding things from you six," Jill said. "Kind of like how the Professor and Shadow had hidden things from us. You all have your own stories how you got here; you four; Jack, Milo, Buddy and Striker, you guys came from different areas of the Nameless Zone but you somehow appeared here."

"That's right," Striker said. "And we all are trying to figure out a way to get us back home."

"Right," Then Jill turned to Brick. "Brick, you came from your parent's farm to set out and make something of yourself."

"Yeah," Brick replied. "I figured it'd be the best if I stuck with you guys."

"And Ani," Jill said, looking at the husky. "You've had an unusual past. Your dispute with Zeta and his forces were tough at such a young age."

"Yeah," Ani said, scratching her head uneasily. She could recall that 7-foot giant of a menace, and how she still had issues with the fact that she was tricked into helping him do all that bad stuff.

"Well, I've been through a lot myself," Jill said.

"What kind of things have you been through?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head. "Bad things?"

"In a way, they were bad things," Jill said. "A long time ago, I lived in a place that was far away from the world; a little village in a forest mountain summit that no one had ever heard of. It wasn't all that bad, it was nice and quiet, and peaceful. But one day, all my troubles started."

"A suspicious character appeared in our village, and everyone was growing afraid of him. Before I knew it, he had kidnapped, taken lives, and he even lit my village on fire. I tried to stop him, but I was so powerless against him. Those that were still alive, they turned their back on me. It was my job to protect them and keep the village safe, but they blamed me for all that happened, and they...banished me from the village."

"Who did this?!" asked Milo , trembling.

"His name was...Deity," Jill replied. "He was a bat; a vampire bat. I don't know where he came from, but for some reason, he was so bent on making me miserable. Maybe that's why he kept me alive when he burned down my village...but the point aside, because I had no home now, I started traveling around. Everywhere I went; he followed me and hunted me down. Every zone I trailed across, he would be there, and another thing; He was a master of secrecy, working in ways so that no one else but me knew of him. Not even GUN knew him..."

"Scary," remarked Striker with wide eyes.

"But the more I traveled, and the more I fought him, something strange happened to me," Jill continued. "I started gaining abilities I never had before. Powers I never imagined began to come to me, and soon, I was able to fight back Deity without getting hurt so much. Of course, I also worked in secret, because I forbid myself to allow anyone else to find out all the horrible things that vampire did. I don't know how long it's been since that last climatic battle I had with him."

"Climatic battle?" Brick asked.

"Yes. My powers soon started to increase drastically over a short period of time; so much that I was given the ability to transform into a being that allowed all that power to let itself out so that it wouldn't be bottled up inside and explode; kind of like how Shadow wears those golden rings to keep his own power from going out of control."

"It was a storming night like this one, and I confronted Deity. I turned into that form that allowed my power to pour out and I let it all out on him, hoping that this time, I could stop him for good and that I can rid him of my nightmares once and for all. It was a long, and hard battle, but I finally stood over his weak body, and I made the last strike. I don't remember what became of him; in fact, that entire battle was a really vague blur to me now that I think about it, especially right after I made that last blow," and even the mention of it caused Jill to rub her brow. "Whatever became of him, I never found out. The last I remembered was that I woke up in the middle of nowhere, in a large field. I immediately discovered that my powers were completely gone. I was devastated that my powers were gone, and I knew I could never go back to my village ever because I was banished. All I had from my home at all, was my very bow." She took it off her shoulders and looked at it, allowing everyone else to look at it.

"So...what then?" Ani asked.

"I continued to wander," Jill said. "I wandered, and wandered, and I wore myself out so much until I finally collapsed in a certain jungle; Mystic Ruins." Then, Jill looked at Tails and Brick with a smile. "The Professor and Brick found me and nursed me back to health, and around that time, that's when we met the rest of you guys."

"Wow..." Jack said, as he looked at the ceiling. "...that Deity sounded like a really nasty fellow. Good thing you beat him up, Jill!"

Tails didn't say anything, as he waited to see if Jill would continue with the fact that her powers had returned; while he had mentioned it to the kids, it would likely be better if Jill herself elaborated.

"Yeah," Jill replied, looking depressed. "Those dark times...it didn't do a lot to me physically, but any veteran of war would know what it would be like. It was so emotionally conflicting for me; every night, I woke up from nightmares and I didn't have anyone to turn to when I needed a friend. I had to fight all kinds of battles alone; I had to fight just to keep from going insane. What happened to my village haunted me, the fact that I couldn't do anything to stop him and that they blamed me for all that happened. Since then, I had made a solid oath; that I pledged loyalty to those who needed my help, and that I would never, EVER leave anyone behind."

"But I'm so sorry," Jill sighed. "I left you guys behind not too long ago...I got careless, and you guys would've gotten hurt, or worse."

"You warned us, so we're okay!" Striker said, hoping it would cheer her up. "And you helped Shadow too!"

"So Brownie," Brick started. "If you're powers are coming back now...what does that mean?"

Jill looked at Brick for a minute, before answering. "I'm not sure myself. I've started having weird dreams two days ago; all of them were different. I told the Professor about them. One of the dreams I told him was that I walked into a church, and I met Sonic the Hedgehog."

"Really?!" Milo inquired.

"Chao?!" even Buddy was surprised.

"Yeah. But there was one thing I forgot to explain to the Professor. There was a mural of some weird angel in a stained glass window above the entire church. What I didn't mention was that this angel being...it was my other form from long, long ago that I once was able

to transform into."

"Whaaa?" Jack uttered, as he looked at Jill with wide eyes. "You dreamed of a mural with an angel that is actually you? But what does that mean?"

"I'm not sure, and I suppose that Jill isn't, either..." Tails sighed, as he closed his eyes. "...but I can only guess that if her powers are coming back, there is something afoot. Something grand; possibly even bigger than Metal Sonic's return."

"What I fear..." Jill said with great hesitation, "...is that he might be returning..."

Needless to say, the entire room was silent.

"I couldn't tell you guys this, because it was so hard to think about it," she said, as they could notice tears welling up in her eyes. "The only reason I could tell you now is probably because I have the strength to be able to tell it; and even then..." She buried her face in her hands and unexpectedly burst into tears, sobbing.

Brick felt so sorry for her. He set a hand on her and rubbed her back comfortingly. "All this time," he said. "...no wonder you worried a lot. I never realized..."

"...don't be sad, Jill!" Jack suddenly said, as he got up from his seat, looking at Jill. "I know that the vampire might be scary, and it's tough for you to think of him... but you're not alone! You've got Uncle Shadow, the Professor, me, Ani, Striker, Milo , Purpy and Brick! We're not gonna let some mean vampire make you feel sad!"

Jill was able to finish crying, and as she wiped away her eyes, she smiled up at Jack. "I know," she said. "And for that...I'm more thankful than you can imagine."

"Does Shadow know about your story?" Ani asked.

"No, he didn't know anything," Jill replied. "I requested that the Professor kept things just between me and him, until I decided to tell you guys everything. Right now, Shadow's more concerned about Metal Sonic, and I didn't want to tell Shadow anything that would just

put more of a burden on him."

Milo looked out the window uneasily, to see if he saw Metal out there. Jill's mention of him reminded that they were on the run from that machine. However, Milo didn't see anything to his relief, that is, when he looked out the window. Unknown to those on the train, on the roof, something was sitting, though it wasn't visible to the naked eye. ... wait for the right moment... and then I'll strike.

"In any case..." Tails said, as he looked at the kids. "...you've been through quite a lot. Maybe you should rest until we get to Station Square ."

"Yeah," yawned Striker. "I'm starting to get a little tired..."

"You guys go ahead and get some sleep," Brick said. "Some of us will keep watch."

"Alright..." Jack yawned, as he actually lied down on the floor, stretching out, before lying his head on his folded arms, using them as a cushion. "Good night..."

Tails smiled, as he closed his eyes, leaning his head against the wall. In fact, nearly everyone else fell asleep, except Brick and Jill. She couldn't sleep, because now she felt a nagging disturbance; why this was it was unknown, but she knew that she couldn't sleep.

And Brick watched her as she surveyed out the window. Ever since he first met her, he always thought that she was just a girl who was gentle, timid, and shy, and so he was fond of her. Now, it was apparent that she was actually very strong-willed, and in a way, completely opposite of what he thought of her as. He was really surprised, especially since he started to feel something he never felt before while looking at her. "Brownie," he said.

"Hm?" Jill turned her attention to Brick.

"You're okay now...right?" he asked. "I mean, have you had any of those nightmares lately and didn't tell us about them?"

Jill shook her head. "No, the nightmares stopped ever since I lost my powers. So far, I didn't start having them again, so I don't think I

should be worried about it."

Atop the train, the invisible being looked down at the roof, somehow seeing through it, along with Brick and Jill interacting, whilst the others slept. *...just a single motion* ... he thought, as he clenched his hand. *...when they least suspect it.*

"Do...you expect that you might have them again?" Brick asked with some concern.

"Honestly, I don't know," Jill said. "Whether I do or don't might tell me if Deity really is coming back, since it's just way too soon to tell if he is. For now, it'll leave me to focus on other things, like Metal Sonic."

Brick started wondering, "What was it like facing him for the first time?"

"Well, at first when I thought I didn't have my powers, I was a little afraid of him," Jill said. "It would've been hard having something happen that I couldn't stop. Now that I had my powers...well, I suppose I was a little confident then. Compared to what I dealt with, he wasn't even all that bad; at least he wasn't humor-challenged."

The invisible being blinked when he heard that. *...interesting.* he thought, before he folded his arms. *Hmph... maybe I'll wait until they arrive at their destination.*

Brick stared at her in slight disbelief, as well as amazement.

"What?" Jill asked, meaning the look that he was giving her.

"That just sounded weird is all," He said. "Humor-challenged?"

"I know, it's not like me to joke," Jill said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, not about fighting," Brick said. "I mean, you usually take it seriously; especially after that story you told us, I'd expect that you'd turn into some intently-focused warrior when your powers start returning."

"You know that's not like me, Brick," Jill said. "Besides, I think it's a

little exciting. After hearing the stories the Professor's told us, it's like meeting a celebrity in the flesh; well, in this case, steel."

"A cold-blooded, serial-killing celebrity," Brick muttered in addition.

"Well, what if he was just misunderstood?" Jill asked. "Everyone thought Shadow was bad at first, but he turned out good in the end."

"I think there's quite a difference between Shadow and Metal Sonic, Brownie," Brick said. "Metal Sonic was created by an evil genius programmed and bent on killing."

"I guess I get your point," Jill said, scratching her head nervously.

... The being's eyes narrowed, before they closed fully *. ...that is the legacy I'm sitting on; a mass-murdering creation and not a powerful ruler? Tsch... but I suppose that it's true.*

"Well, I don't really know," Jill said, as she peered out the window again. "I do know that I'll do everything in my power to stop him if he tries to hurt any of you. After all, the Professor said he was only programmed on killing Sonic the Hedgehog, and now that he's gone, he won't really have to kill anyone without a logical reason. Robots are supposed to be logical, right?"

"…I guess I got your point too," Brick said.

"And now that I interfered, then he has a logical reason to hunt us down," she finished.

The being nodded, though he didn't open his eyes just yet. *Talk all you want; it won't change the inevitable.* he thought.

Brick didn't exactly like the sound of that. Truth be told, he wasn't the kind of guy to be afraid; in fact, he was the kind to take on a challenge with enthusiasm. But this was biting off more than they could chew, and even he knew that. Still, it didn't change the way he looked at her. He never really felt this way about anyone, and he didn't know what it was, or how to describe it.

But somehow, he felt comforted with her being here, despite the unfortunate situation they were in.

It was silent for the remainder of the train ride, and because the train came to a bit of a bumpy stop, it caused the rest of them to wake up. "We are now entering the Station Square Train Station," stated a voice over the speakers.

"Good, we're here!" Ani said cheerfully.

"Yeah, hopefully Grandma Cream will have room for us to spend the night," Striker said, as he got up and stretched.

And by now, that tingling disturbance Jill had, just became stronger a notch. She gripped her bow firmly, becoming alert.

Yawning, Jack got up from the floor, stretching out. "Man, that was a good nap!" he said, before he looked out to try to get a good view of the town; however, as they were inside the train terminal, that didn't go too well.

"Hrm... it's been a while since I've been to Station Square ." Tails mused, as he rubbed his eyes, before standing up. "We're all ready to go?"

"Yep!" all of them but Brick and Jill cheerfully replied, and they hopped off the train eagerly before anyone could stop them. Jill didn't say anything, but when they did that, she almost wanted to jump as her heart skipped a beat. She was the next to get off the train, rushing to them, "wait a minute guys!"

Letting out a sigh, Tails followed after them at a slower pace, after making sure that he had everything with him. "Come on, Brick; we don't want to fall behind." he said.

Meanwhile, as the kids and Jill ran ahead, whatever had been sitting on the train's roof now moved away from it, keeping itself hidden from sight.

"Hold on guys!" Jill said, which halted the kids.

"What is it Jill?" Striker asked.

"…we have to wait for Brick and the Professor," Jill said. "He's not in the best condition you know, and not only that, but we need to stick

closely together and not lose each other."

As the kids looked back to see Brick accompany Tails, Ani let out a chuckle, "Sorry. We forgot." Then she put her hands by her mouth. "C'mon Gramps!" she exclaimed.

That caused Striker to shove her. "Ani, be nice!" he said.

Whatever Jill felt, it was beginning to die down for now, but she was still alert as she waited for Brick and Tails to catch up with them.

As Tails and Brick caught up with the group, Jack couldn't help but scratch the back of his head. "Eh... sorry, Professor. Guess we got too excited." he said, though Tails only chuckled at this.

"Oh, no need to apologize." he said, as he smiled. "If I had been younger, I might have run after you, or ahead of you, just as soon as you kids started." he chuckled.

"Well anyway, Grandma Cream's Chao Care shouldn't be all that far from the station," Brick said, as he went ahead. "Hopefully we can stay there for the night and decide what to do tomorrow."

As the kids went ahead to follow Brick, Jill stayed near the back so she could help Tails if she needed to, but for some reason, she couldn't help but glance back at the train, feeling uneasy again.

Tails noticed this, as he eyed Jill curiously. "Is something wrong, Jill?" he asked, though in a way so that the others wouldn't notice.

Jill looked at the train awhile longer, before she looked at Tails. "That was Chaos Control Shadow used on Metal?" she asked.

"I would suppose so." Tails nodded. "Chaos Control allows the user to bend space and time, if enough power is harnessed. However, as I said, being frozen by Chaos Control isn't permanent, which was why we had to move quickly. Why do you ask?"

Jill looked at the train again, and then she looked ahead as she walked out the entrance, holding the door open for Tails. "I would think with Metal's abilities, he would find some way of following us without our knowing," she said. "Maybe I'm just paranoid…"

Tails merely nodded at this. In honesty, not only did he agree with what Jill said, but he fully expected Metal to do something like that. However, he didn't show this, as he walked through the door. "Come on, let's follow the others. I haven't seen Cream in quite some time..."

"Alright," Jill said. "Hey guys! Wait up!"

It wasn't a very big building, and it was squeezed between two corporate giants, but none the less, it was a quaint little house. Striker was the first to knock on the door, and once everyone made it to the doorstep, it opened.

"My, my," said a sweet voice. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Hi Grandma Cream!" Milo said. "It's not too late, is it?"

"My dear, it's never too late for you all to come visit," an elderly rabbit spoke, as she stepped aside and allowed them inside. "Come in. My goodness, you're all soaked. Were you out in the storm?"

"Yeah, we were!" Ani laughed.

"I hope you don't get sick," Cream said, and then, she saw Tails. "It's been quite some time, Tails."

"That it has, Cream." Tails replied, as he gave her a smile. "It's good to see you."

"Hey, Grandma Cream, how are all the light-blue Purpies doing?" Jack asked Cream; he wasn't fully aware of Buddy's race, so he just called all Chao Purpies.

Grandma Cream giggled. "They are all doing just fine Jack," she said. "One of them laid an egg not too long ago, and it hatched just yesterday."

"Really?!" exclaimed Striker excitedly. "Where is it?!"

"Well, its sleeping now dear," Cream said. "All newborns need all the

sleep they can get."

"Jack, I think they're called 'Chao,' not 'Purpies,'" Milo whispered to Jack.

"But I shouldn't keep you standing here," Cream said, as she turned to walk down the hall. "You should all make yourselves comfortable. I can make you all hot chocolate if you want."

"Oh boy!" Striker applauded.

"Hot chocolate!" Jack cheered, as he looked down at Milo. "Milo, did you hear? Hot chocolate!"

Tails couldn't help but chuckle at Jack's enthusiasm. "I think we might all need something to warm ourselves with..." he said.

"Nothing sounds better," Brick said with a smile.

Once things had finally cooled down, everyone was sitting in the living room with a cup of hot chocolate in their hands. All of the kids finished theirs, of course. Milo had fallen back asleep with his head on Cream's lap, while Ani and Striker were trying NOT to fall asleep on the chair.

Cream had been explained most of what happened, and after everything was said, she had a bit of a grave look on her face. "I knew Metal Sonic returned, seeing as his announcement had gone through the media," Cream said, "but he's chasing you children?"

"I think we might've been lucky enough we got out of Mystic Ruins unscathed," Brick said.

"My goodness," Cream said. "I realize that I was very young when I encountered him, so I don't remember very much of him, but I remember how dangerous he was. What about Shadow?"

"He told us to hide until he dealt with Metal Sonic," Jill replied. "but I think that won't be anytime soon…are you sure about letting us spend a night here?"

"Of course," she said. "You are dear friends of mine, and it is what friends do. However, I must inform you that Charmy might be coming by in the morning."

"Captain Charmy!?" Ani beamed, jumping suddenly enough to startle Striker. Among the little ones, he was dubbed "Captain" and Ani was, by far, the favorite of the bee; obviously, since the two had exchanged prank ideas ever since they were introduced to each other.

"Yes, well, he thought it was a bit dangerous for me to be here all alone in the Chao Care," she said, but by the tone of her voice she wasn't too excited. Cream sighed, "but, I am a bit jumpy around his company, I must admit. He somehow managed to keep all that energy all these years, and he insisted I stay with him and his Detective Agency for safety. He's probably right anyway."

Then she giggled. "Vector certainly rubbed off on him."

"Likely for the better." Tails chuckled. "I couldn't imagine Charmy acting more like Espio; not in a million years."

"The more I hear about everyone, the more I want to meet them in person!" Jack said with a squee, as he was sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth. "Wouldn't it be cool if we could do that, somehow? Meet all of Professor's, Grandma's and Captain's friends way back then?"

"Yeah, that would be interesting," Brick said, as he couldn't help but agree with Jack.

Jill said nothing. In a way…she sort of met them, but only through her dreams. She wondered if she would have any more, and what else.

"Think about how awesome it could have been!" Jack said, as he was engrossed in his own little fantasy. "We could have helped Professor build some of his machines, go on missions with Captain, and a whole lot more!"

"It would have been fascinating, if not quite the paradox." Tails

mused, as he chuckled to himself.

"Well, you all should go get some rest," Cream said, while looking down at the sleeping Milo. "As I can see, it is awfully late."

"But I'm not tired!" Ani protested. "I can stay up ALL night!"

"I'm sure you could," muttered Brick with a glazed look.

"As I said earlier, we've been through quite a lot this day..." Tails said, as he looked at Ani. "The nap back on the train isn't going to keep you fully rested for the night; besides, isn't a bed more favorable than train seats?"

"Well..." Jack uttered, as he yawned. "I am a bit sleepy..." he said drowsily, as he looked like he was going to just fall asleep right on the spot.

"Yeah, I guess a bed is much better than a train seat," Ani said, and of course, she let out a yawn.

Cream carefully got up without interrupting Milo's slumber, and shortly after, she tucked a pillow underneath the little lion's head and covered him with a blanket. Milo turned over, sleeping more peacefully. "I'll go ahead and show you to some beds," she said, ambling towards upstairs.

Soon enough, Ani and Striker had gone to sleep in their own beds, while the others were just getting ready to sleep themselves.

Jill still peered out the window, wondering if Metal Sonic was lying in wait out there…somewhere.

"Jiiiill..." she'd hear Jack utter drowsily, as he hung his arms over her shoulders from behind. "Professor says that you should get some sleep, and you can't sleep if you're standing up... unless you train really well... but shouldn't you go to bed?"

"I will," Jill assured him. "Just go on ahead to bed, Jack."

"Nope, c'mon Brownie," said Brick, as he took her. "You're going to bed too. You're not staying up while we get sleep; wouldn't be fair."

"Besides, you and Uncle Shadow met that Metal Sonic earlier, and I don't think you slept on the train either!" Jack shot in, as he placed his hands on his hips. "So you really need to sleep, and get some sort of rest!" Usually, Jack didn't try to act as responsible as his age dictated, and for good reason; it just came off as completely adorable, with minimal chance of being taken seriously.

Yes, it was adorable, as Jill couldn't help but smile. "Alright, alright," she admitted, allowing Brick to lead her to a bed. Just as she crawled in, she looked up at him as he sat beside her.

"Now, I'm not leaving until you fall asleep," Brick said. "I don't want you to stay up, and that's that."

"As usual, trying to take care of me," Jill muttered, as she continued to smile. Of course, her eyes grew heavy in drowsiness, but she stubbornly fought it.

"Okay, if you're sleeping, then I should go sleep, too..." Jack uttered, just as he found a different bed, which he quickly buried himself in. "G'night! Don't stay up too late, Brick!" he said, before he closed his eyes, preparing for sleep.

"Night," Brick said to Jack, and then he looked back at Jill.

"I guess I never thanked you," Jill murmured. "That fever I had would've gotten worse and…I probably wouldn't be here."

Brick could recall vividly discovering her in the jungle that day, running a high fever when he had brought her to Tails' workshop on the hill in Mystic Ruins. He was checking on her every minute to make sure that she got better. "No need to thank me," he said. "I was happy to help."

Jill's smile grew, as she closed her eyes, and Brick watched as she fell asleep that instant. That same feeling came over him again; the one he had when he looked at her on the train. He wasn't sure what it was at all, but he pulled himself away to approach his own bed, near the Professor who was still awake.

"Is there something on your mind, Brick?" Tails inquired, as he

noticed Brick being hesitant about leaving Jill's side.

Meanwhile, outside the house, the rain had started to intensify, even though the lightning had long since stopped. Right now, an invisible being stood outside, observing the building. *...this is it.*

Brick looked at Tails fairly quickly as his mind went blank that moment. "…I'm not really sure what it is," he said finally. "But ever since she told us her story, I've been getting this weird feeling when I look at her."

Tails raised an eyebrow. "Weird feeling?" he asked; he had a faint feeling on what Brick meant. "How would you describe this feeling, then?"

"It's hard to explain," Brick said, scratching his head. After trying to gather his thoughts, he looked back at the sleeping Jill again. "...somehow, she makes me feel good, just by looking at her. When I learned who she really was, I was sort of impressed by her. The gentle girl I helped turned out to be a strong warrior and..." Brick wouldn't be able to tell that he was beginning to blush a little. "I-I don't know, it's just hard to explain..."

Tails couldn't help but chuckle when he saw that. "I think you'll find out what that is in due time, Brick." he said, before he prepared to go to sleep. "It'll all be clear to you when the time comes, and maybe it'll be clear for her as well..."

Outside, the being finally shed his invisibility, revealing it to be Metal Sonic himself. As the rain fell down around him, and droplets of water bounced off his body, he began cracking his neck. *"A few moments, and they'll be goners..."*

"You think so?" asked Brick curiously, though he knew that the Professor was tired, so he left it at that as he climbed into his own bed, taking one last look at Jill. *What did the Professor mean by that?* He wondered in thought. *Is it because I might be…* he didn't get the chance to finish the thought, because he fell asleep then. He didn't realize how tired he was himself.

Outside, Metal still glared at the house, getting ready to make his

move. *"Time to end this..."*

"I agree, Metal." The new voice surprised the robot, as he looked behind him, only to see Shadow standing there, with his arms folded. "Time to end Eggman's legacy."

Scoffing, Metal turned to face Shadow. *"Oh, really? And how do you intend to stop me with..."* he began, when he stopped himself; he felt something unnerving. *"...you didn't..."*

"Oh, but I did." Shadow replied with a grin, as suddenly, a green, a red, a yellow, a blue, a cyan and a purple Chaos Emerald began rotating around him. "You have the last one, Metal."

Growling, Metal clenched his hands into fists. *"How did you collect all of them in such a short period of time?!"*

"You'd be surprised what wonders both an Emerald and a Chaos Radar can do for me." Shadow replied, before the Emeralds returned to his body. "Now, let's finish this."

"You..." Metal growled, before he suddenly began laughing. *"So it comes down to this. The last one standing takes all. Let's begin, then!"* Then, he and Shadow rushed at each other, both of them throwing a punch, which resulted in their fists colliding at full force.

Cream was about to enter into her own room, but at that instant, she stopped. She thought she had heard something outside…

Their fists were grinding against each other, with both Metal and Shadow refusing to back down. *"...awfully persistent, aren't you?"* Metal uttered, before he threw a kick at Shadow, knocking him away from him.

Hissing, Shadow pulled one arm back, as he charged up an attack in his palm. "Chaos..." he began.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Before Shadow could throw it, Metal disappeared, before reappearing right behind Shadow, his left hand changing into a blade. *"Die!"*

However, before Metal could react, Shadow suddenly twisted his hand so that the palm pointed towards Metal. "...Lance!" Then, a bolt of Chaos Energy shot out of it, striking Metal head-on, sending him hurtling away from the building.

"That sounded like Shadow," Cream murmured, heading down the stairs. "What could possibly be going on out there?"

Picking himself up, Metal looked up to glare at Shadow, only to be surprised to find that the hedgehog was gone. *"Tsch... trying to fool me with Chaos Control?"*

"Something along those lines." Shadow replied snidely, just as he suddenly reappeared next to Metal, delivering a kick that threw the bot off balance. Then, he disappeared and reappeared right above him, delivering a devastating kick when Metal was down.

However, when that attack was delivered, Metal suddenly vanished, before reappearing a distance away from Shadow. *"...just because you have six emeralds..."* Metal growled, as his hands fully turned into blades, which he crossed. *"...doesn't mean that you will win."*

"Hmph..." Shadow scoffed, as he pulled his hands back, Chaos Energy charging up in his hands. "...we'll see."

Chapter 4

CHAPTER FOUR– TRADEGY STRIKES

Meanwhile, Jill was engrossed in another dream of hers, and she clutched the covers nervously.

I wasn't sure where I was. I knew I was in the sky, and the clouds were really dark above me. Something ominous was about, but what it was I didn't know. I gripped my bow tightly, looking around.

I didn't expect to turn and see someone behind me. A golden being emitting a great power around himself, and he looked at me with sharp red eyes. The more I looked at him, the more I recognized his face. It was Sonic; Super Sonic to be exact.

" *You're not too bad," he said with a grin.*

" *Really?" I asked back.*

" *Yeah, you'll be prepared for what's coming." Then he pointed out behind me.*

I turned, and saw something very disturbing. It was too dark to tell what it was, but all the clouds seemed to gather around this dark figure. There was some thunder too, but it was very subtle. "Don't be discouraged," Sonic said. "You've got what it takes, no matter what everyone else says. You just got to do that old-fashioned thing called 'believing in yourself.'"

" *But…what if I don't know what to do?" I asked.*

" *You'll be okay, don't worry," Sonic assured. "If you come to making a choice and you think it's the right choice, go with it."*

" *Trust my instincts huh?" I murmured, looking back at that bad omen that was in the distance.*

Her eyes opened that instant, feeling wide awake. She sat up in her

bed, thinking curiously about that dream, but her thoughts were interrupted by something she heard. Sneaking off to the door, she caught Grandma Cream leaving down the stairs and after checking to make sure she didn't wake anyone else up; Jill left the room and followed Cream down the stairs.

"What's that noise outside?" Jill asked, which startled Cream.

"My goodness," Cream breathed. "Don't jump me like that…I'm old."

"Sorry," Jill said.

"As for the noise, I'm not sure," she replied, as she and Jill headed for the door. "It doesn't sound very comforting…"

There was an eerie silence in the air, as Metal and Shadow stood perfectly still, the rain being the only thing around them causing noise. A sudden bolt of lightning cast a gleam from the blades Metal had replaced his hands with, and the Chaos Energy stored within Shadow's arms was literally making the hedgehog's arms pulsate.

Then, two metallic objects suddenly fell to the ground, making a heavy noise when they hit the concrete. At that moment, an aura of Chaos Energy burst forth from Shadow's body, his wrist rings gone. Metal, observing this, scoffed. *"...all or nothing, huh?"* the machine mused, as Chaos Energy amassed around his blades.

"Indeed." Shadow replied, just as the two rushed at each other, both of them ready to slash their arms at their opposers. Then, in an instant, both of them slashed at each other, grinding to a stop some feet away from each other. Metal's arms were uncrossed, and Shadow had slashed his arms downward. However, from the looks of it, the clash didn't seem to have any effect on any of them... for the moment.

That's when the door of the Chao Care opened, and the minute the two of them saw Shadow and Metal outside, they shared a gasp.

"Shadow?!" Jill blurted in surprise, and then she realized that wasn't a good idea as she clamped her hands over her mouth; despite it was already too late.

Thankfully, Metal didn't seem to notice the call, and neither did Shadow, for that matter, as the two stood silently and perfectly in place. Eventually, however, Metal sank to his knees, looking down at the concrete, as one could see a large wound over his body. *"...lucky shot..."* he muttered, as the Chaos Energy around his blades began fading. *"...but not lucky enough."*

At that moment, Shadow collapsed, his aura fading, as he held his chest in pain; a large, gaping wound now ran across it, and as Jill and Cream would see, Metal's blades were soaked in blood; the Chaos Energy had hidden it from view at first. "Kkh... how did you..." Shadow uttered, just as he coughed blood up; the attack had gone deeper than he had imagined.

"Tsch... Shadow, Shadow, Shadow..." Metal sighed, as he got back on his feet, the wound slowly repairing. *"...just because you fight at your full potential, and just because you're almost fully powered by Chaos Energy..."* he said, before he began walking towards Shadow. *"...doesn't mean that you would win. Your age is likely a contributing factor to your loss."*

Jill was horrified. "Shadow!!! NO!"

And to her surprise, a crowd of figures suddenly shot out from behind her. It took a minute to realize that it was a crowd of Chao, all of them charging after Metal Sonic. Even if they weren't experienced at all in fighting, the numbers would probably be a bit overwhelming for the Metallix; all of them angrily trying to fight Metal.

Surprisingly, however, Metal didn't seem to mind the Chao attacking him, as he kept advancing towards Shadow. *"...pests... begone."* he said coldly, as while he walked, tendrils shot out from his body, whipping away the Chao. *"Now, Shadow... let me relieve you of your emeralds."* he said, before he began searching the hedgehog's body.

Shadow gritted his teeth, as he was unable to stop Metal from picking the Chaos Emeralds from his body; as much as he wanted to, the pain from the attack was overwhelming him. "Gnh..."

Once Metal stepped away from Shadow with the emeralds, Jill ran

over and knelt by Shadow. He was gravely hurt...

"Kkh..." Weakly, Shadow looked up at Jill. "...what are you doing? I can take care of myself..." he spat, as he attempted to get up on his feet, but to no avail; the stress of releasing so much Chaos Energy, along with the injury, prevented him from getting up further than to his knees.

"A fine show, Shadow." Metal mused with a chuckle, as he was busy observing the Chaos Emeralds, just as the gray one emerged from his chest. *"Now... as a reward for letting me have these, I'll show you all one last glimpse of my power... and then, you will never have to worry about the fate of the world, ever again."*

Jill looked at Metal without a hint of intimidation, and then she shook her head. "Yeah, you did a good job taking care of yourself, Shadow," she said to the black hedgehog on the ground. "Don't move…" Shadow wouldn't expect this, but Jill set her hands right on his wound. *Can I be able to do this?* She wondered, as she tried to concentrate hard. Soon enough, a faint glow came from her hands, and to this, she smiled.

Shadow blinked, as he looked down at the glowing hand. "What... what are you-"

"Now, let us begin." Metal said, as he didn't even seem to notice Jill. Then, the seven Chaos Emeralds began rotating around his body, and as they did, he began chuckling, before breaking out into a full-blown laughter. *"Yes! The new rule of Metal Sonic officially begins... today!!!"* Then, as he laughed, the glow from the emeralds intensified, and before long, beams of energy shot right out from them, up into the sky, before they suddenly descended, combining into one massive beam, which collided head-on with Metal, causing a massive explosion where he stood, engulfing him entirely in smoke.

The door of the Chao Care burst open, with Brick, Jack, Ani, Milo, Striker, Buddy, and Tails barging out. "What's going on?!" screamed Ani.

Jill didn't respond to them, or Metal. She had to use all of her

concentration on Shadow's wound, which was slowly beginning to diminish away thanks to her powers. Finally, Shadow's cut was completely gone, as well as some of his weariness which he could feel, and in exchange, Jill felt a bit exhausted as she took her hands back; covered in some of Shadow's blood.

"...hn?" Shadow uttered, as he looked down at his chest, before looking at Jill. "...just how did you..." he began, when he noticed the smoke, and came to realize that Metal was within the smokescreen. "Damn... don't tell me that..." he muttered, but as the smoke cleared away, he got a surprised look on his face. "...huh?"

As it turned out, when the smoke cleared away, Metal looked completely different; his quills now resembled Shadow's, instead of Sonic's, his hands and feet had a bulkier design to them, rather than the rounded variety his Neo form had shown, and all in all, he seemed more menacing than ever before. Also, the Chaos Emeralds were nowhere in sight.

Seeing this, Tails had a surprised and terrified look on his face. "...what in the... when did he obtain that form?" he uttered.

"Uh-uh-uh-oh!" Milo stuttered, hiding behind Striker. "That d-doesn't look good."

Seeing Metal's new form, Jill stood up. Miraculously enough, she smiled. "You clean up pretty good Metal," she said.

"Brownie?!" Brick said in utter disbelief.

Metal, however, didn't reply, as he instead looked calmly towards Jill and Shadow, glaring at them with a cold gaze. "..."

"Tsch..." Shadow spat, just as he got on his feet, glaring right back at Metal. "It doesn't matter what form you've taken; I'm going to destroy you!"

Then, Metal suddenly scoffed. *"Hmph... come and try."*

"Alright," Jill said.

"Count us in too!" exclaimed Ani, as she jumped right in beside Jill.

Already, telekinetic energy was oozing from her body.

"You sure?" Jill asked, turning to her. "Might be dangerous."

"We don't leave anyone behind," Brick said, as he stepped up too.

"Yeah, we're gonna show him!" Jack shot in, as he took out his harmonica, glaring at Metal. "He's gonna pay for being so mean!"

"...very well." Metal scoffed, and in an instant, he vanished, without a single trace.

Upon seeing this, Shadow's eyes widened in surprise. "Wha-" he began, when all of a sudden, he felt someone grab the back of his head. Then, he was suddenly slammed face-first into the concrete, and for a brief moment, everyone could see that Metal had slammed Shadow into the ground like that.

Then, before anyone could even react, Metal vanished, and reappeared almost instantly in the same spot he had previously stood on. *"Go on; hit me."* he said coldly.

"Ungh..." Shadow groaned, as he quickly got back on his feet, looking at Metal. "How did he move like that? He didn't use Chaos Control, and yet..."

"Now that's just being a bully," Jill said, folding her arms.

"My turn!!!" Ani shouted, as she raised her arms. Many different objects rose up from the road around them, such as a mail box and a car, glowing with her energy. Then, she threw them upon Metal.

"Geez Ani," Striker said. "You think that's enough?!"

"Intriguing ability..." Metal mused, as he calmly glanced at Ani, before he suddenly vanished once again, leaving the objects Ani hurled towards him to crash into the ground, without striking home.

"He's fast..." Tails uttered, just as Metal returned to the same spot once again. "...I haven't seen speed like that since-"

"My turn!!!" Jack suddenly called, just as he began playing his harmonica, and with the microphone turned on, he created a powerful sonic boom that shot straight at the robotic hedgehog.

However, just as it seemed that it would collide with him, a black barrier suddenly popped up around Metal, blocking the sound waves from reaching him. *"...fascinating."*

"Let me give it a shot," said Brick. His nose ring began to glow, and a red mass of energy started to come off of him. Then he ran his foot into the ground, and started to charge for Metal, horn-first. All the energy around him transformed him into a gigantic red bull of energy, heading for the robot.

With a scoff, Metal simply raised his hand as the red bull rushed towards him. *"...futile."* he said, and just as it seemed like the bull would collide with him, it would instead collide with a barrier erupting from Metal's hand, making it seem like he was literally keeping the bull from reaching him with just one hand. *"Hmph!"* Then, with a mighty push, the two would be separated, though Metal still stood just where he had stayed for the majority of this battle.

And that was enough to send Brick hurling back, turning back into his normal self and landing on his back, hard. "God almighty!" he roared, rubbing his back to ease the pain.

Striker spit into his hands. "I'm up to bat!" he said, and from out of nowhere, he pulled out an aluminum bat that he twirled around in his hands, before he gripped the handle firmly. "Ani!"

"Right!" the husky used her telekinesis, picking up smaller blunt objects that were fist sized, and held it at Striker's convenience. Then, Striker began to bat with extreme force and speed, sending those objects at Metal.

However, as the objects flew towards him, they suddenly stopped when they got close enough to him. *"Truly an intriguing ability..."* Metal mused, and as they would notice, his eyes were glowing the same color as the telekinetic energy. Then, all of the objects suddenly dropped straight into the ground, being forced to burrow themselves beneath the concrete.

Seeing this, Shadow gritted his teeth. "What is going on? He's just playing with us... unless..." Then, his eyes widened. "No way... that's your-"

"It seems that you finally got it, Shadow." Metal shot in, as he raised his hands, looking at them. *"Yes... with the seven Chaos Emeralds, I achieved this Super Form; the last thing my creator perfected before his demise."*

"So essentially, we might be screwed?" Brick supposed. "Great...just great."

"Not entirely," Jill said.

Hearing this, Metal turned his head towards Jill. *"Hmph... you're certainly optimistic. Perhaps the adrenaline of battle is getting to you... very well. Let's knock you out of that stupor."* Then, before anyone could react, Metal suddenly vanished and reappeared in front of Jill, delivering a fierce kick aimed at the ewe.

Jill knelt over, letting the kick fly over her head, manageably; she didn't expect Metal to vanish and reappear like that. "It's been awhile since I fought, so I'm warning you; I might be a little rusty," she said. "In which case, I think a warm up is in order."

"Hmph... you're quite the case." Metal mused; he hadn't expected Jill to be able to dodge his attack. *"But I do not have time for warm-ups. When I'm done with you, I'm out of here."* Then, before Jill could get in an upright position, he threw a punch right at her.

Sure, she wasn't able to evade it, but she was able to cushion the blow by using her arms as a shield. "Define 'being done with me.'" She said. "Are you intending to just beat me in a fair match, or actually kill me?"

Just what are you doing Brownie? Brick wondered in thought, watching her in amazement.

"Do I even need to answer that question?" Metal quipped back, just as he began hurling projectiles made out of Chaos Energy at Jill, intending to completely overwhelm her. *"Unless you have no idea of*

who I am, of course."

It was a bit much. She couldn't avoid them all as some of them struck her down, but she planted her foot firmly on the ground, avoiding falling down no matter what the cost, and a small smile was on her face. "Well then, it might take awhile," she said, "because I have a lot of endurance." With a snap of her fingers, a white flash summoned forth her bow, which was previously next to her bed. Then, something strange started to occur. Her clothes began to ride on a delicate air as if she were in the gravity-defying vacuum of outer space, and Jill's long hair suspended out as well. It wasn't something over the top compared to Super Metal, but it definitely made some of the kids look at her with a gaping mouth.

"Cool!" Striker said.

Jill herself wasn't sure just how much of her abilities have returned, but if she accomplished this stage while regaining them, then she might be lucky. Even Metal's sensors would detect that her energy was increasing by the second.

Indeed he did, as Metal folded his arms whilst observing this phenomenon. *"...you're not the average run-of-the-mill Mobian, after all..."* Then, he scoffed. *"Very well. I'll be a good sport; try hitting me."*

I don't know how long I'll last against a Super, Jill thought, as she brought up her bow. In her hands, an arrow of energy appeared and she put it in place to shoot. However at the last minute, instead of shooting it directly at Metal, she aimed up at the sky and let it go. The arrow of energy flew high, but suddenly, it wasn't just one arrow anymore. It split into two, and then those split to make four, and those split to make sixteen, and before they knew it, it was a whole shower of arrows. Jill knew better than to leave it at that though, as she began to circle around Metal very quickly; her feet were just barely touching the ground, as her "delicate air" allowed her to move swiftly and smoothly. Then she shot even MORE arrows, but directly at him this time.

I know he might be able to avoid those, she thought, *but I have to see how much of my power is coming back.*

However, in spite of Jill firing arrows at him, Metal remained where he was, as the arrows aimed at him quickly met an untimely end via a black barrier, and with seven Emeralds powering it instead of just one, it remained perfectly solid, despite. His gaze was directed up at the arrows in the sky. *"...cute."* he said, before suddenly, he began hurling Chaos Energy projectiles up at the arrows, aiming at them with pin-point precision, just so he could cancel out this attack.

"Hm," *he's got seven emeralds,* she thought. *I have to figure out a way to get them away from him.* Jill peered over at the others. It truly wasn't safe having to fight Metal with them around; they could get caught in the line of fire.

So she looked over at Metal. "Can I request that we take the fight away from here?" she said.

"What?! Brownie! You can't fight this guy by yourself!!!" Brick bellowed, and he was going to run to her, but Ani stopped him by snaring him in a web of telekinetic power. Nonetheless, Brick tried to struggle, even though it was futile.

Metal glanced at her for a moment, before he chuckled. *"You honestly believe that you have even the faintest chance against me in one-on-one combat..."* he mused, before he looked away. " *How amusing. Though, I would love to see the anguished looks your comrades have when they see you die..."*

"Stop!" Shadow called, as he suddenly warped right between Metal and Jill. "I'm not going to simply stand by and allow this... I won't let anyone die over something I should have settled! Not again! We're going to fini-" However, before he could finish his sentence, he felt something pierce through his body.

"Funny. I don't recall speaking with you." Metal said coldly, as he was pointing his finger at Shadow; however, a tendril had emerged from his finger, and it had gone straight through the black hedgehog, all the way over to Jill, where it had stopped right in front of her face, letting her see the bloody tendril up-close. Then, before anyone could react, the tendril lashed upwards, taking Shadow along with it, before Metal suddenly whipped the tendril in such a way that Shadow was hurled right next to the others.

Before Jill could even get time to react to this, however, Metal suddenly vanished and reappeared right in front of her. *"Have it your way."* he said, before suddenly grabbing her wrist, and in that instant, both of them vanished.

"SHADOW!!!" screamed Milo, as the lion was the first to run to the gravely wounded hedgehog. Then Striker and Buddy came over, and once Ani released Brick from her telekinetic hold, they came to Shadow as well.

"Oh no, Shadow..." Cream gasped, as she was on the brink of tears.

"Uncle Shadow!" Quickly, Jack rushed to Shadow's side, shaking his body. "Uncle Shadow... please, don't be..."

At that moment, however, Shadow coughed up some blood, and began breathing heavily. "Kkh... where did they..." he uttered, as he tried standing up, but found himself collapsing on his back instead; even though Jill had healed his previous injury, he was feeling the extra loss of blood already.

"Tsch... children, don't waste any time! Get whatever medical supplies you can find, and quick!" Tails said, as he knelt besides Shadow. Quickly, Jack had grabbed hold of Milo and Striker, running into the house to find anything they could use to aid Shadow. Cream and Ani accompanied the three of them to help.

Leaving Brick and Tails the only ones with Shadow as the bull knelt down beside the hedgehog as well, looking at him solemnly. "Not again?" he said. "What did you mean by that?"

"...I guess Tails never told you about that, did he?" Shadow eventually uttered, as Tails looked away. "Hmph... can't blame him... it's not something anyone would want to dwell on..."

Then, the hedgehog looked at Brick. "The very last time we faced Eggman in battle... I failed to protect someone very close to me. While we may have won that fight... I always felt like an idiot for allowing that to happen..." Then, he began coughing.

"Shadow, please..." Tails said, as he took hold of Shadow's hand.

"...don't strain yourself. Try to relax..."

"Someone close to you?" Brick said, looking concerned. "Who was that?"

Blinking, Shadow looked weakly away from Brick, as he closed his eyes. "...it was..." he began, but for some reason, he couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

"...Rouge." Tails eventually said, letting out a sigh. "She was caught by Eggman, and to set an example... he had her shot. In front of us all, no less."

"That government agent?" Brick said, recalling the stories. "Your partner…"

The kids finally came out of the house, carrying a variety of things such as bandages, ointments, iodine, and whatnot. "Shadow! Please be okay!" Ani said, rushing to Shadow.

Metal and Jill then reappeared in the middle of a plain, grassy field, with no other distinguishable features whatsoever but the full night sky covered with a blanket of stars, and the midnight breeze blew over the grass gently.

Jill was utterly shocked, so much that she had frozen in her shock at what she had just seen. The only reaction she had to offer was tears that began to trickle down her cheeks as she quivered.

"There; we've relocated." Metal said coldly, as he released his grip on Jill's wrist, before moving away from her. *"I hope you're ready for this; otherwise, you're just going to end up like Shadow."*

Get a hold of yourself Jill, she thought, as she wiped her tears away with her arm. That shook her up a lot; she definitely wasn't Ms. Optimistic anymore. She felt something growing inside her. Her sorrow was building up, even with the fact that she tried to set it aside. *Don't act on feelings,* she tried to remind herself, but it wasn't working. As her emotion was becoming more unsteady by the second, something else was increasing inside of her.

The gentle breeze suddenly became very violent. Dark clouds began to gather in the sky, darkening the field even more.

All the memories of those dark times against him...they were popping up very vividly in her mind now, and it only provoked her to become even more unstable. *Not again,* she thought desperately.

...and Metal's sensors could detect this unnaturally rapid increase of power.

Metal blinked, as he observed Jill with some interest. *My... I haven't seen power like that since...* he thought, as he waited to see what would happen. *...this might be more interesting than I initially thought.*

Jill couldn't control herself anymore, and her body was carried up into the air as the winds began to circle around her. The dark clouds above parted barely enough to allow a moon beam to shine down upon her. "Okay Metal," she said. "You've convinced me how serious you are. Now I'm going to show you how serious I am."

Her eyes sharpened, despite the tears that fell from them. As they fell, they were suspended in the air and began to circle around her, like the winds.

Metal folded his arms, before scoffing. *"How serious I am? Are you talking about what I did to Shadow?"* Then, activating his jet boosters, he began hovering up into the air as well, his eyes locked on Jill. *"That was an act hardly worth my time. I haven't even begun showing my true prowess, Jill."*

Jill took up a godly white glow, and the winds grew more violent yet. "Neither have I, Metal," she said. "Let me entertain you then, if that's what you want." She was consumed completely in light, and the light began growing brighter, and brighter, until it was blinding.

A powerful force shot out with a devastating impact that sent grass blades flying everywhere as a blinding flash took place. White energies swirled around that vortex of light like a demonic storm.

While he didn't show it, the immense force of this power surge

surprised even Metal, as he looked at what was happening. *...now, this seems somewhat familiar... let's see what she can do,* he thought.

The winds sure didn't calm down at all, but some of the light died down. Once it did, Metal would see an even stranger sight. A white being was in his presence, with the energies swirling around her. The violent winds tossed and turned her long, wavy white hair, revealing something on her back.

Sticking out of her back were long feathered wings, with quite an impressive wingspan for her. They were made of a transparent, green energy.

And as for her eyes, not only had they turned a brighter green, but her sclera was green, as if they belonged to an alien. They still bore tears, but they also looked at Metal piercingly.

"...hm." Metal uttered, as he folded his arms . *"An excessive amount of Chaos Energy seeps through you... this is quite the latent ability you have."* he mused. *"Now... let's see what you can do."*

"I assure you," she spoke, with a godly echo, *"it isn't Chaos Energy."* Once she brought up her bow and pulled the string, another arrow of energy appeared in place. However mediocre it seemed as before, however, once she released the arrow, it turned out to be an overwhelming, monstrous beam that parted the ground with its mighty impact as it flew towards Metal; seeming more like it came from a giant cannon rather than just a bow.

Fast! Realizing that simply blocking this attack was out of the question, Metal quickly flew away from the path of this beam before it could strike him. *"It isn't Chaos Energy... but it feels like it."* Then, energy began charging up in his chest. *"But if it isn't Chaos Energy, what would you call it?"* Then, a massive, red beam shot out from his chest, and like Jill's attack, this beam was powerful enough to split the ground it traveled along open, and the wind pressure was powerful enough to send the parts of the ground that weren't disintegrated flying away.

SLASH! The attack was simply bounced away by a vague object

that Jill possessed in her hands, allowing the beam to leave a crater in the field elsewhere. Then she whirled it in her hands before Metal could see what it was in her hands. It was no longer her bow, but now it was a large blade. Its hilt looked like a pale rose with arms like feathered wings, as well as the green jewel that had been on her bow as well.

" *He called it…Purity,"* she said. *"A type of rare energy that is sometimes intertwined with Chaos and something almost absolutely no one knew about; not even I know what it really is or how it came to be, but that's what that vampire called it."*

Then she came, gripping her sword firmly as the blade emitted an aura of white "Purity" energy around it. Once she was close enough, she swiped her sword numerous times, shooting out long slash-like waves of Purity energy at the metallix.

However, these waves of Purity were suddenly struck away from the Metallix, and Jill would immediately see why. Protruding from Metal's hands were two blades, both of them covered in red Chaos Energy, and both of them used to repel the massive slashing waves. *"Purity... versus Chaos..."* he mused, before scoffing, just as four tendrils with blade-like appendages emerged from his body, all four of those covered in Chaos Energy as well. *"Let us see which is stronger."* Then, suddenly vanishing and reappearing, the Metallix began slashing his blades at Jill, the Chaos Energy leaving trails in the air he slashed across.

Jill crossed her arms and concentrated. A barrier of green energy appeared in front of her, blocking all of the attacks that Metal dished out. *"But just because I don't know much about it, doesn't mean I don't know what it can do,"* she said, for once the attacks stopped, her barrier remained attached to one of her arms, acting like a shield. Then her sword started to take a godly glow, and she pointed it at Metal. *"Like what it can do to a Super,"* she said, and afterwards, she shot out a small beam from the tip of her sword. It was much too quick for Metal to avoid, and it hit him square in the chest. It didn't hurt a single bit, however, something strange started to occur to Metal.

If he looked at himself, he would realize he was slowly reverting out

of his new form, and back to his regular Neo Form.

"Wha... WHAT?!" Metal blurted out, as he backed away from Jill. *"How... how did you do that?"* he uttered, as he glared at the ewe. In spite of his super-form being canceled out, the Chaos Emeralds were still within his body, rather than being spread out in all directions. The power of *Purity...* he thought, as he scanned Jill from where he stood. *...quite fascinating.*

The first beam did that much, but she had to get the emeralds away from him. *"That's my secret,"* she said, replying to his question.

Metal nodded, as he folded his arms. *"Though I am impressed that you can nullify my Super form so easily..."* he began, before his eyes very briefly flashed green. *"...what makes you think that I can't just revert into the Super form once more?"*

" *Because I can do this,"* and the minute that she lurched her hand forward, Metal would feel something very disturbing occurring to him. *"Now that I've gotten you out of your Super form,"* she said, *"you won't have a need for these anymore."*

And strangely enough, he would see one emerald trailing out and coming to her. Then a second, and a third, and soon enough, all seven had left Metal's grasp and come to her, circling around her instead. Throughout all this, Metal couldn't move, as if somehow he had been frozen.

Jill glanced at all of the emeralds, and then closed her eyes. *"You can depart,"* she said, as if talking to the emeralds. *"You are all free now…"*

Miraculously, the emeralds all ascended up into the sky as they continued to revolve in a circle, faster and faster as they rose higher and higher into the air. Then the minute that they ceased their motion, they were gone in a blink, taking off in blurs directions and disappearing off into the horizon in seven different directions.

Then she looked at Metal. *"Looks like its back to square one for you,"* she said.

"..." Metal was silent, as he closed his eyes. *"...now you've made me very curious..."* he began, just as his eyes flashed blue. *"...but at the same time... you've made me very mad. Furious, even."* Then, all of a sudden, the ground itself gave out a blue glow, just as large chunks of earth were lifted up into the sky, as a result of Metal having copied Ani's data, attaining her telekinesis. *"And I can assure you... it's a long, LONG way for me to get back to square one, Jill."* Then, mercilessly, the chunks of ground rocketed towards the ewe, without delay, and seemingly endlessly.

Jill held up her shield, increasing in size accordingly to the chunks of earth that Metal flung at her. *"You're such a sore loser,"* she said, rather apathetically. *"Get used to your disappointments."*

The clouds parted above, as the moon shined down upon her like a spotlight. She raised her sword up, and from the sky above, small sparkles began to swirl around her blade, giving it a godly glow again.

" *I'll see you later, Metal,"* she said.

Then she lurched forward and slashed through Metal with such blinding speed that he couldn't possibly have evaded it.

"!" When Jill slashed through him, a massive cut appeared on his chassis. *"...that was..."* he uttered, as his body fell to the ground, completely motionless where it crashed.

Jill watched as Metal fell, but she knew she couldn't stay. She had to get back and make sure the others were okay; when it occurred to her what had happened before Metal took her away. "Shadow!" she gasped, turning and flying off in the direction where the city was…

"Shadow, hang in there," Striker said. "Jill will come back…and then she'll heal you like she did before!"

"If I ever see Metal again, I'll crush him and turn him into a tin can!" Ani growled.

As he was being treated, however, Shadow remained silent,

memories from long ago flashing through his mind. *...she'll heal me... but...* he thought, just as he briefly winced in pain.

"Just hang in there, Uncle Shadow!" Jack said reassuringly. "Everything's gonna be fine..."

Cream was very much worried about Shadow, watching them tend to his wound, but she also noticed Brick sitting by a window and staring out it silently. Seeing as the kids were handling Shadow just fine, she came over to Brick. "Is something wrong dear?" she asked him.

"I'm worried about Brownie," he said, without looking away from the window. "What if…she doesn't get here in time?"

"D-don't say that, Brick!" Jack said, as he looked at the bull with teary eyes. "Jill's gonna come back... a-and she can help Uncle Shadow! Right?"

Tails sighed, as he watched Shadow remain immobile where he was being treated. *Shadow...* he thought solemnly.

"Shadow, please hang on…" Milo pleaded, as he was already crying. "We need you."

"Chao," Buddy added sadly.

The others would then hear the door open slowly. It took a while for everyone to turn to where the noise of the door came from, and they heard dragged steps up until it came around the hall.

Jill was no longer in her form, but her normal sheep self by now; so they never knew. She looked pretty weary, and it was understood. She also saw everybody's sad looks. "Is Shadow...?" she tried to ask, but weakly trailed off.

With a groan and a cough, Shadow looked towards Jill. "...you're... alright..." he uttered, before closing his eyes. "...then... you beat Metal?"

"Uncle Shadow's still here, Jill..." Jack said, as he scratched the back of his head. "...but if you can't help him..."

"…I can help him," she muttered, as she trudged to the black hedgehog on the couch. Then she knelt down beside him. "Yes, I beat him," she said, "and the emeralds scattered." Then she was going to set a glowing hand on his wound.

However, before she could place it on his chest, Shadow quickly grabbed her wrist, keeping her hand away from him. "That's good... to know..." he said weakly.

"U-Uncle Shadow?" Jack uttered, as he watched Shadow keep Jill's hand away from him. "What are you..."

"Don't worry about me..." Shadow said, as he looked up at Jill. "I've... lived long enough."

Jill looked at Shadow that moment, and after awhile, she let the glow around her hand die out. Then she placed her hand on his forehead. "I understand," she said. "I guess you've lived a long, hard life…"

Milo was already weeping in Cream's lap, as the old rabbit stroked the little guy comfortingly, even as she, herself, was in tears.

"H-hang on... so, you're not going to..." Jack uttered in sheer disbelief, tears swelling up in his eyes. "But... that means that-"

"I'm afraid so..." Tails said with a sigh, before looking at the black hedgehog. "...you're sure about this?"

"Hmph... when have I not been sure about anything... aside from the invasion?" Shadow replied with a smirk, before he closed his eyes. "...but it has been a good life..."

Brick stood up from where he sat by the window and joined the others. Like Tails, he had a serious expression on his face, and it was hard on him too, even if the bull didn't show it. *I guess he'll be where he wants to be now,* he thought. *With his partner…and that Maria girl from the stories.*

Jill gave Shadow a kiss on his forehead. "Sayonara, Shadow the Hedgehog," she muttered.

It didn't take long. Eventually, the warmth faded away from him, and

his body fell limp, though a smile remained on his lips. Thus, Shadow the Hedgehog, the Ultimate Lifeform, after about 150 years since his creation, passed away.

Chapter 5

CHAPTER FIVE – MOVING ON

It felt like forever before the morning came. The night had been prolonged by their grieving over Shadow, until most of them finally cried themselves to sleep. The five of them took it really hard; Ani, Striker, Jack, Milo and Buddy. Cream was certainly disheartened by the loss of an old friend, but she knew that Shadow would've wanted to go through with it; after all, immortality can be a curse.

Jill had stayed up all night, along with Brick. Tails had gotten back up pretty early, as the three of them watched the sunrise through the window.

"What are we going to tell GUN now?" Brick asked.

At first, Tails didn't answer, as he closed his eyes. "To be honest, I wouldn't be surprised if GUN already knew of it... and if I'm not mistaken, some of them are going to want his body for 'further research', as they put it..."

Brick grunted, "Hmph. lousy little…" and he trailed off in grumbles. Then he turned to Jill, who continued to look out the window. "Brownie, you haven't said anything since last night…" he said. "You okay?"

"I will be," she said finally. "I just…I got so careless…"

"No, don't," Brick said. "Don't go beating up on yourself. It was his choice…"

"I know that," Jill said, peering down at the ground. "I just feel guilty though…I don't know what got into me, when I kept acting so cocky around Metal…"

"Perhaps it was a side-effect, as a result of your powers returning?" Tails inquired, as he looked at Jill. "Do you have any memory of ever acting like that in the past, Jill?"

"No, because I was against a serial killing vampire who caused me to live a depressing existence every day of my life," Jill said. She realized it came off sounding a bit rude. "Sorry, I didn't mean for it to sound like that," she apologized.

"It's alright," Brick said. "Besides, how were you able to beat Metal, even when he was in his Super form?"

Jill blinked, and then looked back out at the window. "Now that I think about it, I'm not quite sure how I did it…I just did."

"You're going to have to explain it Brownie," Brick said, rubbing his brows impatiently.

"Well, I think I'm fully aware that my powers have come back, because I was able to transform into my other self," she finally said.

"Really..." Tails mused. "So... how did you overcome him, in his Super form?"

"Well…" Jill looked lost in thought. Back then, she acted like she knew what she was doing, but in reality, she felt like she was possessed by her power. Frankly, she never knew that she could do that to the emeralds, or even bring a Super out of its form. It was as if the answer had come to her that instant. Well, that's what she got if she transformed under the stress of her emotions.

So she proceeded to explain to the two of them what happened, as well as adding her input to that.

"Purity huh?" Brick said, "and…it actually had influence over the Emeralds?!"

"Pretty shocking huh…?" Jill said.

"Well, it is a first to hear..." Tails nodded, before he let out a sigh. "...but for some reason, I can't help but have this nagging feeling... that Metal may still be functioning..."

"I'm sure he is, and that we'll meet him again," Jill said. "But now I suppose he started looking for the Chaos Emeralds."

"And now that Shadow's gone...it's up to us," Brick said.

"I'm afraid it is..." Tails said, before he let out a sigh. "GUN's forces would barely faze him without one Emerald, and... well, we all saw how he fought with all seven. If only I had been younger, I might have been of more use..."

"Hello?"

The three of them would stop, hearing a voice down the hall. Then there were footsteps, and the door opened. The three of them would turn seeing an old bee walk in; Charmy. "Oh, well if it isn't Tails!" he said, with a big smile on his face. He was much shorter than Tails was, bearing a gray beard, but he had the same enthusiastic appearance when he did as a toddler. "Brick and Jill too? Wow, this is a treat!" he said. "You guys are troopers! Did you come all the way here to protect Grandma Cream until I came?"

"Actually Captain," Brick said. "There's been an incident...and a casualty."

"Uh-oh," Charmy said, losing his smile. "It hasn't been any of the munchkins, has it?"

"No, the kids are safe..." Tails began, as he stood up, looking at Charmy with a solemn look. "...but sadly enough... Shadow passed away last night." he said, closing his eyes.

"What?" Charmy staggered back a moment, overwhelmed with shock. Then when he backed into the wall, it started to sink. "Shadow the Hedgehog...gone?" Then for the first time ever, he looked very serious. Never in a thousand years did Charmy look serious, but now was different. "How?" he asked calmly.

"Metal Sonic," Jill said. "He was killed in an attempt to defend us..."

Charmy remained silent a little more. "He was the boldest hedgehog around, besides Sonic," he said. "It's a shame those two are gone, especially when we need them now, more than ever..." Charmy walked away from the wall and up to the three of them. "Where is his body?"

"Downstairs..." Jill said. "Grandma Cream will probably call for GUN to send a couple soldiers in to pick him up."

"I see...well, we'll wait to leave until Shadow is properly taken care of then," the bee said. Then he set a hand on Tails' shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "He was important to all of us."

"Indeed, Charmy..." Tails replied, before he looked at the bee again. "At least... he's found peace, now."

"Yes," Charmy agreed. Then after some more silence out of respect for Shadow, Charmy cleared his throat. "Anyhow, I suppose this changes a few things," he said. "You're all planning to come to the Agency's HQ as well, I presume?"

"That's right," Jill nodded.

"Good, that's good," Charmy said, nodding as well. "The crew is anxious to see the munchkins again, especially Rudy. He's been a little stir-crazy lately; some playtime with the other kids might serve some good for him."

"Should I go wake everyone else up?" Jill asked.

Charmy shook his head, "No. We shouldn't wake them up, not until Shadow has been moved. I think they've been through enough."

"Right…" Jill said, turning back to the window.

"Well, I will go ahead and check in with Cream," Charmy said, heading for the bedroom door. "Take it easy."

After awhile, the two GUN soldiers finally arrived, saluting as Cream and Charmy answered the door. "Ma'am, we've received information from our superiors about a casualty of one of our men."

"Yes, I made the call," Cream said. Then she allowed them in, while leading them down the hall. "Right this way please," she said. Charmy followed behind the men that followed Cream, all of which led into the living room.

The soldiers looked upon Shadow's body with utter shock, despite

their efforts to hide their reactions. Even Charmy was a bit hardened seeing the hedgehog he knew long ago, but he had already seen his friends pass away before; nothing new. Nonetheless, the men got to work, cleaning up and zipping up Shadow's body in a sack. Then they were about to carry him away, when one of them turned to Cream. "Ma'am, on behalf of the entire military; no, the entire government," he said. "We offer our condolences for this loss."

"I appreciate that," Cream said, and then the men went ahead out the door, with Charmy closing it behind them. "Then shortly after," she said. "Our times will come too."

"Sadly, yes," Charmy said. "We've had our good times while it lasted Cream, but now those times are a torch we need to pass down to the next generation."

"I know," Cream said.

"Anyhow, lets get ready to go," Charmy said, as he started marching up the stairs. "I'm going to see the munchkins."

A little later…

"Guys?" Jill said, shaking Striker, then Milo and then Ani. "C'mon, wake up."

"Time to get up Jack, the Captain's here," Brick said, as he shook the big lion.

"Huh, the Captain?" Ani was the first to wake up, and spotting Charmy in the room immediately... "Captain!!!" she blurted, jumping out of the bed and throwing her arms around the bee. "Oh, it was terrible!!!" she cried. "Last night—"

"I know, I know," Charmy said, trying to calm her down as he hugged her. "I heard everything Ani, but please relax. The nightmare's over; I'm taking you all to the CDA (Chaotix Detective Agency) HQ."

"Hn... Captain?" Jack uttered, as he got up, rubbing his eyes, before looking at the bee, hearing what he said to Ani. "...we're gonna see the crew?" he asked, as he slowly got out of bed. "It's been a while

since we saw them..." Just from listening to the lion's tone, one could tell that he was still torn over what had happened, and with good reason; Shadow had practically been his idol ever since they had arrived in Mobius, and with his passing...

"Take it easy there Jack," Brick said, patting the lion on the back after interpreting the tone in his voice.

"Well, grab your things and let's get going," Charmy said.

All the kids looked at each other. "We didn't get a chance to grab anything from the Clubhouse before we left," Striker remarked.

"Well, then we'll be able to leave a bit quicker then," Charmy said. He saw all the glum looks from the kids, but nonetheless, they all gathered up and walked out the door. Jill took the liberty of taking Tails' bag.

"So…how are all of us going to get to HQ Captain?" Ani asked.

"Easy," Charmy said with a smile on his face. "I've got Cal coming in with the chopper!" And the minute that they all stepped outside, they would hear a loud noise. Looking up, there it was; a big yellow helicopter with a symbol on the side of it that said the letters "CDA" on its side. It wasn't long before it landed in the middle of the street. Just as soon as the propellers died down, the door to the pilots seat opened.

Stepping out was a monkey; 17, wearing a mediocre headset and a pair of glasses. He was not like other Mobians, for he was barefoot, walking on his hand-like feet, and his long tail swayed to the side when he saw them approach the copter.

"Heya Captain!" the monkey greeted.

"Hi Cal; on time as usual!" Charmy said.

"So who's the crowd here—" the monkey named Cal suddenly stopped in his tracks. He removed his glasses when his eyes fell upon one particular individual in the group, and started blushing wildly. "Oh…Hi, Miss Jill," he uttered.

Charmy couldn't help but snicker. He had forgotten that the monkey had a crush on the ewe.

"Oh, hi Cal," Jill said, but she wasn't as enthusiastic to see him as he was to see her. She was still thinking about the events from last night.

"It's been quite some time, hasn't it, Cal?" Tails noted, as he allowed himself to smile just a bit.

"Professor! Hi!" Cal said with a big smile on his face, shaking the Professor's hand eagerly. "It's been too long! You're coming too?!"

"Yeah, all of us are coming," Striker added.

"Hm, might be a bit of a load for the chopper, but nothing I can't handle," Cal said. "Climb aboard, crew!"

No arguments there. Each of them climbed aboard one by one as Charmy helped some of the littler ones on board like Milo and Ani. When Jill was climbing on, Cal took her hand to help her up. "You can sit in the passenger seat if you want," he said.

"I guess I'll do that," Jill said. "Thanks."

Subconsciously, Brick uttered a subtle growl when he saw that, but he ceased when he realized it; wondering what his problem was.

Seeing this, Tails couldn't help but let a chuckle escape his lips, but he quickly cleared his throat to let it go unnoticed. "So, are we all ready to go?" he asked once he boarded the copter.

Once he asked the question, Cream came up just as Charmy helped her on, and then he climbed aboard himself. "That's everyone, Cal!" he called. "Take us up!"

"Yes sir!" Cal replied, starting up the engine. "Make sure you guys are all buckled up!" He wouldn't really give anyone that chance literally though, as he pulled the helicopter up with a shaky start. Then it took off through the air over the city.

"Wow!" Striker said, marveling down at the ocean beneath them.

"We're up high!"

"YIPES!" Milo squeaked, clinging unknowingly to Ani, who tried to push him off.

"Hey, let go!" she said.

He let go. "Sorry," he apologized.

This managed to get a few chuckles out of the group, which was decent. It was still pretty silent, as most of them were probably depressed about last night.

"You guys seem so down in the dumps…" Cal said finally, breaking the silence. "Is everything alright?"

"A lot of things happened last night," Brick replied bluntly. "Most of us don't exactly want to talk about it."

"But if you really want to know, maybe Jill can tell you most of what happened," Ani added.

"Really now?" Cal asked, just as he turned to Jill. But the funny thing was that he discovered she had fallen asleep in her seat with her head slumped over; seeing that surprised Cal which was enough for the others to come forward to look.

When Brick saw this, he smiled with relief. "That's good; she needs the sleep," he said, as he sat back down. "Poor girl doesn't usually sleep so well."

"She doesn't sleep well?" Cal asked, a bit worriedly. "Is there a reason she can't sleep?"

"She's just restless," Brick muttered, becoming a bit annoyed with the monkey already.

"Well, once we get to HQ, we can find her a more comfortable place for sleep," Charmy said. "Cal, why don't you call HQ and tell Rudy or Boomer that we're on our way back; whichever one answers."

"Already doing it, Captain," Cal replied, as he pressed on his

headset. "Hey, are you guys there?" he said. "We're coming back now."

At first there was silence, and then, *"Cal, you gotta hurry back! It's an emergency!!!"* it was the sound of a small boy's voice.

Cal sighed, knowing that his usage of 'emergency' wasn't as serious as it was made out to be. "Alright Rudy, what is it now?" he asked.

" *Boomer's on the warpath again!!! She's gonna string me up if you guys don't get here and stop her tyranny!!!"*

"Rudy, what did you do to make her mad this time?" Cal groaned.

" *I didn't do anything, I swear!"* the voice on the other line protested. *"I just thought I'd use one of her custom weapons as a water gun! It's her fault that she doesn't have a sense of humor!!!"*

Cal rolled his eyes. "We'll be there shortly," he said. "Just don't provoke her rage anymore than you already did…" After that, the other line hung up, with Charmy chuckling.

"Sounds like Rudy's caused some trouble again," he remarked.

"Yep," Cal sighed.

Cream smiled amusingly at Charmy. "Now, I wonder where he got that from," she chuckled.

"What're you talking about?" Charmy said, looking elsewhere innocently, though on the contrary it made him look guiltier. That brought out some subtle laughs.

There it was. They had crossed the ocean and over the tree tops to reach a three story house, which barely even looked like a house with added adjustments to the architecture. On the top, there was a landing pad with the same CDA initials on it for the helicopter, just for them to come to a slow halt and carefully land on it. It was apparent that since Charmy took over the Detective Business, he had made an effort to be a little more successful than Vector was.

When the helicopter was shut down completely and they were

beginning to climb out, Cal was about to set a hand on Jill to wake her up, before—

"C'mon Brownie," Brick said, as he pushed past and hoisted her up instead, helping the sleepy Jill climb out of the chopper.

And when Cal was the last to climb out, he glared at Brick when the bull's back was turned. *So, it's going to be that way, is it Ring-face?*

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!"

The sudden scream stopped everyone in their tracks as the entrance into the building from the landing pad burst open, and a little kangaroo boy hopped out madly in fright. Next, there was a frying pan that was hurled at the boy, but missed, however; hitting the ground with a CLANK!

"RUUUUUUUUDY!!!" screamed another voice. From the doorway, out stomped a girl; a duck to be more specific. She was in her early 20s, wearing a pair of overalls and a furious look on her face. As she huffed and puffed in her anger, she finally noticed the crowd that was standing outside, and she straightened up immediately. "Captain!" she said.

"It's a miracle!" the kangaroo said, rushing to Charmy and clinging to his legs. "You're back from the dark abyss of absence!!!"

But Charmy picked up the kangaroo by the back of his sweatshirt, chuckling. "Well, I'm curious what your excuse is this time Rudy."

"I swear, the minute you and Cal left, the entire building became a battlefield!" he said. "And, and she came out of nowhere, like some sort of aerial bomber! Then without warning—"

"Never mind, boy," Charmy grunted. "We have guests, so mind your manners."

"Hm?" Once Rudy was placed back on the ground, he turned to see the gang, and beamed wildly. "GUYS!!!" he exclaimed.

"And even Professor Prower too?" the duck girl asked with some surprise.

"Yes Boomer," Charmy said.

With a smile, Tails nodded to the duck. "It's good to see you too, Boomer." he said, before looking at the kangaroo. "And you as well, Rudy."

"Boomer!" Suddenly, Jack made a run for the duck, and quickly gave her a hug. "How have you been? I haven't seen you in a while! Did you make something cool again?" he asked in rapid succession, a smile on his face.

Boomer wasn't exactly happy, but she accepted the hug from Jack nonetheless. "I DID make something, but Rudy decided to take it for a test run," and she shot another glare at the kangaroo.

But Rudy wasn't paying attention, even when the Professor said hi. He was caught up with the other kids, talking wildly amongst themselves; especially Rudy and Ani. "Rudy, my man, how's it going?!" Ani greeted, as the two of them started on some sort of a made up hand shake.

"Nothing much," Rudy replied. "I scored some really good pranks though!"

"Really?!" Ani said, jumping up and down. "You have to tell me about them!"

"Later," Brick said, helping Jill across the landing pad. "Hi Boomer."

"Hey Brick," Boomer greeted.

"Boomer, why don't you help Brick find Jill a place to rest," suggested Charmy.

"Sure thing Boss," Boomer said, joining Brick and Jill as they entered inside.

"Well, make yourselves comfortable everyone," Charmy said.

"See you later, Boomer!" Jack called when she, Brick and Jill went inside, before he suddenly rushed to the others, crouching down next to Rudy. "How did the test run go, Rudy?" he asked almost

immediately, a giddy grin on his face.

"It was great!" Rudy exclaimed. "It works really well as a water gun!" Then Rudy started hopping off. "C'mon guys!"

"Okay!" Ani said, as she attempted to hop like Rudy after him. Striker started laughing, as he started hopping like Rudy too and Milo too; all of them laughing.

"What a relief," Cream said with a sigh, when they weren't listening. "It's good to see them cheer up after all the awful things from last night."

"Indeed..." Tails said with a nod, as he watched the kids, Jack included, hopping about and laughing.

The ruined city of Metropolis. Since Eggman's final defeat, the once-sprawling city was now nothing more than a distant relic of the past... though, it also served as the headquarters of his successor.

At this moment, that very same successor sat by himself in a chamber, many wires connected to his body, as he observed a computer screen, with several images flashing by. *"Hmph... the data I collected from Jill during our fight should have given me some clues of this 'Purity'... but so far, nothing."* he scoffed, before closing his eyes. *"Before I can use the Emeralds properly again, I have to counter that power, so that she cannot nullify my Super form..."*

Incoming Transmission…

There were a series of beeps, and then a voice spoke. *"This is Agent SNITCH, reporting Chief."*

"...SNITCH, huh?" With a sigh, he folded his arms. *"No need to be so formal; Metal will do just fine."* he said, before closing his eyes. *"What do you have to report?"*

" *Professor Prower and his friends have arrived at CDA HQ,"* the voice said.

"CDA HQ..." Metal mused, before chuckling. *"Good work, SNITCH. I'll send one of my creator's old designs there soon enough. However, if you could keep the one they call Jill preoccupied... it'd be much obliged."*

" *Shouldn't be a problem Metal,"* the voice on the other end said. *"After all, she was exhausted. Just what happened?"*

"Let's just say that we had a square-off, before Shadow the Hedgehog's untimely demise. " Metal replied, just as he began scrolling through several data files, bringing up images of different robots. *"You needn't worry about it; just make sure that she... stays out of harms way."* As he spoke, he stopped by a picture, showing what appeared to be a pirate-inspired robot. *"I wouldn't want her to get hurt, you see."*

" *Well, then I'll be sure to treat her like a princess,"* the voice said.

"The fairest princess in the land, no less." Metal responded dryly, just as he typed in a few commands on a keyboard. *"Nothing would be too good for Shadow the Hedgehog's successor."*

" *Affirmative,"* the voice said. *"In that case, I will leave you to your own business."* And with that, the transmission ended.

With a sigh, Metal pressed one button, and then, a map showed up on the computer screen, with a large, red window appearing that said 'COORDINATES LOCKED'. *"...now, let's see how they will fare against this."* he said, before pressing another button, which made another window pop up, this one saying 'LAUNCH INITIATED'. *"And if there will be any casualties..."*

Slowly and gently, Jill was laid down on the bed with a few tired mumbles, and Brick pulled the covers over her as she settled her head on the pillow.

"Having problems sleeping?" Boomer asked, leaning against the wall with her arms folded.

"It's bad enough that she hardly sleeps on a regular basis," Brick

said, as he watched Jill drift immediately back to sleep. "But with all we went through lately, that hasn't helped very much either."

"What's been happening to you guys?" Boomer asked curiously.

Brick sighed, as he was pretty tired too. "A lot," he said. "For starters….Shadow's dead."

Boomer looked shocked, looking at Brick with widened eyes. "Really?!"

"Yeah. Metal Sonic killed him."

"Geez," Boomer muttered, scratching her head. "I'm sorry to hear that…"

"Everyone took it pretty hard," Brick added. "I did too, but…I didn't really show it. After all, he took me shooting…" In fact, Brick sort of looked at Shadow like a father, in a sense. Sure, Brick had a dad, but he left home; and he never really got to do stuff with his real dad like he did with Shadow.

"Well, c'mon," Boomer said, motioning him out the door. "I bet you guys are hungry for some pancakes."

Brick's stomach moaned to that, so the bull started to follow her out, shooting one last glance at Jill, who slept peacefully on. Then as the two of them walked down the hall, the hopping children came through, crashing into Boomer, which resulted with all of them piled onto her.

"Hi Boomer!" laughed Striker.

Boomer tried to restrain her temper, as she pushed them off and got up. "You guys hungry?" she asked them.

"ARE WE!" Jack replied with quite some enthusiasm, before stopping for a few moments. "...wait, are we hungry, guys?" he asked, as he scratched his forehead.

"Food sounds REALLY good right now!" Ani said, clinging to her stomach.

"Are you going to make some breakfast Boomer?!" Rudy asked, hopping up and down multiple times, that is, up until Boomer caught him in midair, glaring daggers at him.

"YES, I'm going to make some pancakes!" she growled at the kangaroo. "Now, you'd better shape up! I'm still not happy about this morning, you know!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, sure," Rudy said quite casually, as Boomer dropped him onto his feet.

"Pancakes?!" Milo said. "I LOVE pancakes!!!"

"With tons of sugar and syrup!" Jack chimed in with a laugh. "And bacon, and blueberry jam, and more syrup!"

"AND WHIPPED CREAM!" practically the rest of them shouted. "Oh, and syrup too!" added Ani.

Boomer groaned, as she walked down the hall with all of the kids following.

Charmy could've heard that miles away, and in remark to that, he laughed, while sitting with Tails and Cream in another room. "It's so nice when we have them all together," he said. "They certainly brighten the day!"

"I'm surprised Boomer is the way she is," Cream said. "Considering that she's Bean's granddaughter." Oh yeah, the three of them could remember that crazy duck; who could forget with all the explosives he always carried around?

"Heh. At times, she even reminds me a bit of Rouge." Tails chuckled. "Aah... it's been quite hectic, but now, everything seems to be going nicely."

"What a shame that we aren't as active as we used to be," Cream sighed.

"What are you talking about?" Charmy said, standing up. "I don't know about you, but I still got it—AGH!" Charmy then bent over suddenly, forcing him to sit back down. "I don't think I should've

done that," he said, rubbing his back.

"Maybe not..." Tails commented, before sighing. "Time is quite a cruel mistress..."

"Hello Brick," Cream said, as the bull came over and sat down with them.

"Now, what're you doing hanging out with old people like us?" Charmy chuckled, trying to forget the pain in his back. "Aren't you afraid that we'll cramp your style?"

"No, I don't worry about stuff like that," Brick replied, somewhat distantly as he was looking away while lost in thought.

"...you've got something on your mind, haven't you, Brick?" Tails noted, as he gave out a chuckle; he had a good feeling about what it was Brick was thinking of.

"…Hm?" Brick finally turned back to Tails. "Oh, yeah, I sort of do…"

"What is it dear?" Cream asked.

"Uh…" Brick scratched his head.

"Would this have anything to do with Jill, Brick?" Tails inquired, as he tried to hide a smirk.

That caused Brick to turn red in an instant, remaining silent.

Charmy, after observing this, couldn't restrain himself from breaking out into laughter as he knew right away what was going on. "I don't believe it!" he chuckled, as his laughter finally died.

"Don't believe what?" Brick asked, though a little afraid of what Charmy's answer would be.

"You've got a thing for her, don't you?!" Charmy supposed, which made Brick all that much redder in the face.

"Wha?!" Brick blinked.

"Well, that is the logical assumption..." Tails said, as he folded his arms. "No need to be shy about it, Brick; you can tell us if you want to get anything off your chest."

"I…" Brick trailed off. In honesty, he wasn't sure what that feeling he got was, but now that Charmy said something, he was actually wondering if the old bee was right. *Am I really attracted to her?* He thought, and of course, he felt like he already knew the answer to that. "I…think you're right, Captain," he finally said in bewilderment.

"How adorable," Cream giggled.

"I knew it," Charmy said, chuckling. "They always go for a damsel in distress. I knew that it would be the case ever since I heard you saved her in Mystic Ruins."

"Believe me, Charmy, I've seen more hints of it than just that..." Tails chuckled, before looking at Brick with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. "So, thought about telling her about this soon?" he asked in a semi-serious tone, though he did it mostly just to see how Brick would react.

"I'm not sure," Brick said, scratching again, since they were already embarrassing him enough.

"Well, better be quick about it sonny," Charmy said. "Before you know it, some other guy will come along and sweep her up off her feet, and because I like you, I'll let you in on a secret. Cal has taken a liking to her too."

"R-really?!" Brick asked.

Charmy nodded, "M-hm."

"Well, that seems to be a problem, wouldn't you say?" Tails remarked, before looking around him. "Speaking of, Charmy, wherever could Cal be? I haven't seen him since we arrived here."

"Not sure," Charmy said, scratching his beard. "He's not very social. He probably locked himself up in his room with all those equations of his—"

"BREAKFAST!"

"WOOOOOOOHOOOOOO!!!!" a scream from all the kids sounded.

"OW, MY EARS!" Boomer cried.

"But you don't even *have* ears Boomer," remarked Rudy.

Jill yawned as she rose up from the bed, rubbing her eyes. That felt really good; she hadn't really gotten a full night's sleep, and she felt good as new.

"You okay now?" As Jill started to stretch her arms out, she met face to face with someone, which made her jump back with a small yelp.

It turned out to be Cal, who was upside-down, being the fact that he was hanging from the ceiling by his hand-like feet and his tail. "Oh, sorry," he laughed embarrassingly, flipping over onto the ground. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Jill took a deep breath of relief. "It's alright," she said. "Just don't do that…"

"What? I like the feeling of blood rushing to my head," Cal joked, sitting on the ground criss-crossed. "It feels like a workout!"

Jill cracked a half-smile, but she wasn't exactly all that amused. Cal saw this, and he cleared his throat in slight nervousness. "Anyway, I just wanted to check up on you," he said. "It didn't look like you had a good night last night…"

"No, I didn't," Jill replied.

"Do…you want to talk about it?" Cal asked. "I mean, everyone looked so glum on the copter. It must have been something bad."

"…You know Shadow the Hedgehog, right?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Well…he died last night."

Cal didn't look as shocked as most people, but he understood how serious it was, as he looked at her. "Was he important to you?" he asked.

Jill nodded. "I guess I'm okay about it now," she said. "I wanted to save him, but he told me that he didn't want me to. He had lived a long time, and after hearing his story from the Professor, I understood."

Cal nodded, while continuing to look at her. "I'm sorry," he said.

"No, it's fine," Jill assured with a small smile. "No need to apologize." By then, the door opened, and in walked Brick. He stopped, seeing Jill awake and with Cal, and immediately things grew tense. "Oh, hi Brick," Jill said, oblivious to the tension in the air.

"Hi," Brick said bluntly, while continuing to glare at Cal. "I came to check on you."

"I'm alright," Jill said.

"I can see that," Brick said. "By the way, there's some breakfast for you Brownie."

"Breakfast?" Jill's stomach sounded to that, and she got up from the bed with a smile. "That's sounds great," she said. "Thanks."

"No problem," Brick said, as Jill walked out the door. Then Cal got up, and the two of them exchanged sharp glares. "I'm going to keep an eye on you, monkey boy," He said.

"Really now?" Cal responded. "Is there something that calls for that?"

"Yeah," Brick growled. "I don't like you already. You seem too shifty for your own good."

"Well Ring-face," Cal said, walking past him and out the door. "All's fair in Love and War." Then when Brick wasn't paying attention, the monkey whacked the bull upside the back of his head with his long

tail, as he walked away.

Brick rubbed the back of his head as he watched Cal walk away, continuing to glare at the monkey.

As everyone gathered for breakfast, no one would notice an unidentified object flying towards the HQ, though with its trajectory, it would likely crash a distance from the HQ, rather than on top of it, and, of course, no one heard it once it landed outside.

"Hi Jill!" said Striker, as Jill sat at the table. "How'd you sleep?"

"I slept good, thanks," she said.

But as Brick was walking down the hall, he just happened to glance out the window, and he stopped. He saw a strange object that was positioned near the HQ that he swore he hadn't seen before when they came in the helicopter. He looked more closely to try and make it out…

As it turned out, it was a capsule; a large, black, featureless capsule, save for what appeared to be a skull and crossbones on its side, akin to those found on pirate sails. However, for the time being, it was closed.

Brick frowned. *That doesn't look very good at all,* he thought. In fact, he had a suspicion of what it could be, and to this, he hurried down the hall. He attracted some attention from those gathering at the breakfast table.

"Brick?!" Jill said, watching him walk off. "What are you doing?!"

"There's something outside," Brick said, heading towards the stairs that would take him to ground level.

"What's outside?" Striker asked, but Brick didn't reply that time as he disappeared down the stairs. "Brick!"

"Something outside?" Tails mused, as he held his chin. "Strange... there shouldn't be anything out of the ordina-"

"Something outside?" Jack repeated, just as he stepped away from

the table, grabbing Boomer in the process. "C'mon, let's go see what it is!" Then, before she could protest, Jack ran after Brick, with Boomer in tow. But she protested anyway. "Hey! Wait just a minute here!" Boomer said, regardless of the fact that Jack wasn't going to let her go anytime soon.

Once outside, Brick stopped a good distance away from that pod, as he tried to observe it more closely and cautiously. "What the hell is that thing?" he wondered.

It didn't take long for Jack to catch up with Brick, and once there, he let go of Boomer, as he looked at the large pod. "Waaah... what is this?" he uttered, as he tilted his head. "Boomer, do you know what it is?"

However, as he said this, the pod suddenly began shaking; not by a whole lot, but still enough to be noticeable.

"Stay back!" Boomer said, putting Jack behind her. "That doesn't look promising…"

Just then, some of the others such as Striker, Jill, Cal, and Ani stepped outside to see this strange object as well. "What is that?!" Jill gasped.

"Hm, judging by that logo, I'm guessing that whatever is contained in there may probably be hazardous," Cal muttered.

"Gee, thanks for the deduction, Holmes," Brick groaned sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "It couldn't be MORE obvious then that!"

As it continued to shake, suddenly, steam began emitting from the pod, and it seemed like it would blow up at any moment. However, after a while, it suddenly stopped shaking, and part of it actually fell off from it, leaving a lot of steam to billow out from the opening.

"Waaah..." Jack uttered, as he walked closer to it, despite having been warned by Boomer. "What do you think is inside of it?"

"Wait a minute," Cal said, looking at it more closely. "I think I might know what that is…"

"Well, don't just stand there; tell us!" Brick said.

Chapter 6

CHAPTER SIX – AN ORDEAL WITH A PIRATE

"It's—" but Cal would find himself to be interrupted as a massive, robotic hand grabbed the side of the opening, before something began emerging from the opening. Slowly, the figure became clearer, as the steam slowly vanished, and soon, it became apparent what they looked at; a large robot that resembled a pirate, with his alloy being shaped like a pirate's coat, and his head shaped like a pirate tri-corn. And right now, the robot glared at Jack, who was completely awed by what he saw.

"That's... that's..." Jack uttered, before he suddenly gave out a squee. "THAT'S GOT TO BE THE COOLEST THING I'VE EVER SEEN!" he exclaimed.

"But who'd send a robot to us?" Boomer asked.

"Metal Sonic; who else?" Jill said. Just as she stepped forward, Cal stopped her.

"Don't," he said to her. "I don't want you to get hurt…"

Slowly, the robot got out of the capsule, still glaring at Jack, who had a look of absolute anticipation and joy on his face... when all of a sudden, the robot accidentally tripped on the edge of the pod's opening, leading to him falling flat on his face, likely giving everyone a reason to be surprised.

This counted for Jack as well, who had almost the same expression on his face, except that his irises had shrunk in surprise at seeing the robot fall so ridiculously. "Eh?"

Cal's response was a facepalm, while Brick groaned, "Oh brother… what a piece of junk."

"WHAT DID YE SAY?!" Suddenly, the robot got back on his feet, glaring at Brick. "I won`t allow ere t' tarnish th' name o' Captain

Whisker that easily, ye scurvy dogs! Now who spake that? I want names!" he bellowed with quite comedic rage, his speech quite like a stereotypical pirate.

Yes, it was funny to see him mad, as Striker and Ani tried hard not to giggle. "Ha-ha, he fell on his face!" Ani teased.

"Captain Whisker…?" Jill muttered. "That sounds familiar…"

Then it occurred to Brick. "He was from one of the Professor's stories," Brick whispered to Jill.

"Oh yeah…" Jill murmured.

"Captain Whisker eh?" Cal said, as he adjusted his glasses. "I'm Calculate the Monkey, but I prefer it shortened to Cal, if you would."

"I'm Striker!" said the bear cub, waving his hands, with Ani doing the same.

"And I'm Anistasia!" said the husky. "Can I shave off your mustache?!"

"What? Nay, ye canna!" Whisker protested, as he placed his hands on his hips. "Ere who tries messin' wi' me whiskers, be subjected t' havin' ice cubes coverin' the'r toes, an' ye won`t be wearin' any socks!" he said in a semi-menacing tone, but bearing such a message, he wasn't likely to be taken seriously by anyone.

"I like this guy; he's funny!" Jack laughed, before he placed his hands behind his head. "My name's Jack! Nice to meet you!"

"He's not serious is he?" grumbled Cal, as he rubbed his brows. "Ice cubes? What kind of robot is he?"

"Huh, I guess he is a little funny," Jill said, even giggling. "Well, I'm Jill."

"Jill?" Whisker repeated, as he held his chin in thought. "Now, 'ere could I be havin' heard that name..." Then, he shook his head, before he looked around him. "Anyway, 'ere be this place, anyway? I think I lost me bearing; first I be on me ship, an' now I be here!"

"Ship?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head. "You mean that thing you came out of?"

"I…think he actually means his pirate ship, Jack," Brick said, though he didn't keep track of whether or not Jack remembered the stories.

Striker didn't. "Whoa! A pirate captain?!"

"NOW he gets it," Boomer sighed. "I'm Boomer," she finally introduced herself as, seeing as it wouldn't do any harm.

"Aye, me pirate ship!" Whisker said, as he nodded. "But, 'tis strange..." Then, he held his chin, rubbing it with a hum. "'tis all a blur, but I reckon bein' on me ship... wi' me crew... then thar be a battle, an'... Aarr, I canna reckon! How did I end up in this pod, anyway?!" Then, he began humorously pounding the pod with his fists, banging it completely out of shape.

"Hm?" Jack hummed, as he held his chin, looking at Whisker for a while. Then, he suddenly got a shocked look on his face. "You mean that he was a pirate?" he said with a shocked tone.

Boomer grumbled, rolling her eyes. She wasn't even going to bother with how oblivious these kids were.

"Well, I suppose he didn't come from Metal Sonic then, like you supposed Jill," Cal said, looking Whisker over. "But he certainly packs a punch, as I can plainly see…"

"Hrm..." Jack hummed, as he scratched his chin. "...Boomer, maybe you and the Professor could find out where he came from? Maybe that can fix his memory, too?"

After a while, Whisker stopped hitting the pod, and began heaving for his breath. "Now I be havin' nay idee how... but I be goin' t' find ou' what happened t' me ship... if 'tis th' last thin' I`ll do!" he eventually said.

Jill finally walked up to Whisker. "Uh, listen," she said. "I'm not quite sure if we can help much, but we know someone who might be able to help you with your memories…" *though why he was sent right here is still suspicious,* she thought.

Whisker blinked, as he looked at Jill. "...really? Ye think ye could help me wi' that?" he said, before suddenly shaking his head. "I mean, 'tis nay like I be askin' fer help, or anythin', but..."

"It's not much trouble…not that I know of," With that, Jill looked back at Jack. "Jack, you think you could go fetch the Professor?"

"Okay!" Jack said, before he rushed back towards the HQ.

"Brownie, you sure it's a good idea?" Brick said, whispering so that no one would hear him.

"Not really," Jill said, whispering back. "But so far, he hasn't tried to hurt us. I just want to figure out why he landed here though. Maybe something in his memory might help us find out."

"Fair enough," he said.

When Jack left, Whisker threw a glance at Cal, and tilted his head. *...haven`t I seen ye somewhere before?* he thought, as he folded his arms. *I dasn't know why, but I be gettin' some kind o' vibe from ye...*

Cal noticed the robot looking at him, but pretended to ignore him. He didn't feel very comfortable though, having a robot stare at him. In the meantime, Boomer walked up to Whisker, looking him up and down while she rubbed her bill. "Hm…you're an interesting design," she murmured.

"Interestin'? How do ye figure?" Whisker inquired, as he looked down at Boomer.

At that moment, Jack returned, as he was literally carrying Tails with him. "I got the Professor, Jill!" he said, before carefully placing Tails on the ground.

"Phew... the next time you want me to come see something, you could just..." Tails began, until he saw the large pirate robot, which made his jaw drop. "...oh."

"Hn?" Whisker blinked as he noticed Tails. "Wait... I reckon ye!" he said, as he pointed at Tails. "Ye`re that fox! Th' one wi' th' cat, th' hedgehog an' th' raccoon!" Then, his arm lowered, and he tilted his

head. "...wait, he wasn`t that old... be he?"

"Well, it's been a long time since you last met the Professor, Whiskers," Jill explained.

"A long time?" Whisker repeated, as he held his head with an astounded look. "Jus' how long have I been ou', anyway?"

"Right..." Tails said, before looking at Jill. "So, you needed me to do what, exactly?"

"We need you to find his memory, Professor!" Jack said, as he looked up at Whisker. "You see, he needs to find his ship, and..."

"He said something about a crew, and remembering a battle before a black out," Ani remarked. Then she marched up to the gargantuan pirate robot. "Are you sure I can't shave that mustache off?! Pretty please?!"

"I told ye already, ye canna touch me whiskers!" Whisker retorted, as he glared down at Ani. "Ye`ll be havin' t' face tickle-torture, if ye plan on doin' that!"

"If we take a look in his memory banks," Brick added, looking at Tails, "we might also find the reason why he was sent here."

"His memory banks?" Tails mused, as he rubbed his chin. "That is doable, but doing so while he's active could be risky. We should find a way to shut him off before we try diving into his memory banks."

"Can we wait after breakfast?!" whined Striker. "I'm starving!"

So, of course, they took the time to get something in their stomachs before the Professor, Jill, Brick, Boomer, Cal, and the kids all gathered in Boomer's room, which was filled with a majority of tools, racks portraying custom weapons, and a majority of other technical things. It was a regular shop alright…

"Alright…so, how do we shut you off?" Boomer asked Whiskers.

"How ortin' ta I know?" Whisker replied, as he folded his arms. "I dasn't think I`ve ere needed a reason t' shut off before, ducklin'."

"Hrm... he was quite relentless back then..." Tails noted, as he scratched his head. "I doubt that there's anything as simple as a switch we can just flick on or off, though..."

As Tails noted this, Jack seemed to notice something about Whisker from behind, and quickly tapped Ani's shoulder. "Hey... see that blue thing on his neck?" he whispered, as he pointed at something small and blue on the back of Whisker's neck.

"Ooo," Ani murmured with interest, as she reached for it. However, she was much too short, and just before she had the chance to levitate with her telekinesis, Rudy pushed through and hopped up to touch it.

"What are you doing?!" Boomer asked Rudy, though it was already too late as Rudy had touched the blue thing on Whisker's neck.

The moment Rudy touched it, however, Whisker suddenly stiffened, before slouching over, the light in his eyes fading out. And seeing this, Jack gasped. "What happened to him?" he asked, as he tapped the robot lightly.

"...huh." Tails uttered, as he saw what Rudy had touched; a blue switch. "...I suppose this is irony." he mused, before nodding. "Well, he's shut off now, so we can get to work on jogging his memory."

"Alright," Boomer said. "First let's get this heck of a hat off his head." And with a couple screwdrivers, Boomer was able to do that. They opened his head to find a mess of wires.

"Uh, Boomer," Cal said. "You could've just popped out the microchip in his brain…"

"I know that," Boomer said. "But I'm also checking to make sure this guy doesn't have some internal bomb in him. I *never* trust a robot, believe me, and FYI, this is how you manually program a robot, before we even had microchips."

"Well, while you're checking for bombs," Cal said, putting it in a

mocking way. "Should I go ahead and take out the microchip."

"Yeah, whatever," Boomer said apathetically. "Just don't let that geek in you turn you into a pompous sourpuss."

Cal glared at her, and Brick couldn't help but laugh. He could tell that Boomer didn't like Cal that much either, and that was a plus. Then Brick held it in when Cal turned the glare at him, though Brick could only grin. The monkey rolled his eyes, while Boomer handed him the microchip that she took out, and Cal left out the room right away.

"Why don't you kids go with Cal and see if he finds anything," Boomer said, while fishing through the wires.

"Okay," Ani said, as she went the same way that Cal did, along with Rudy, Striker, Milo, and Buddy. "Um... I'll go help out Cal too!" Jack eventually said, before he followed the other kids after Cal.

"Cal gives me crap on a daily basis," Boomer says. "Not a lot of people know the real Cal very well because he's Mr. Anti-Social around strangers."

I guess that means he's fond of me…great, Brick thought sarcastically.

Tails couldn't help but sigh; while Espio and Vector had been a bit unruly with each other, they had still been good friends, but Tails honestly didn't see anything like that between Boomer and Cal.

"Is he like that all the time?" Jill asked.

"Not all the time, to be honest," Boomer said. "Usually, he's just super quiet, but when he decides to come out of his hole, he can be as much a thick-headed smart-aleck as Brick if he wants."

"Really now?" Brick said, raising an eye brow at that statement.

Jill suddenly burst into giggles. She had a little understanding of what Boomer was talking about; she had to deal with it sometimes too.

Then Brick turned to Jill. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Jill said, trying to suppress her giggling.

One would expect Brick to huff and get mad about that, because he didn't usually like it when someone laughed at him about a statement like that, but after a while, a small smile soon appeared.

When Brick smiled, Tails couldn't help but do so as well, before he returned his attention to Boomer. "Will you need any assistance, Boomer?"

"A little bit," Boomer said. "Like I said earlier, I don't trust robots. So if this guy decides to pull a fast one, I'm installing a failsafe into him to ensure that we keep him under control…"

Jill looked confused, "I thought you were looking for—"

"I know, I know," Boomer groaned. "I only told Cal that to send him off. To be perfectly frank, I don't trust him anymore than I trust a robot."

"Hi Cal!!!" Rudy said, which jumped the monkey.

"W-what are you guys doing?" Cal asked them.

"We want to help out!" Striker said.

"Yeah, Cal! Several heads are way better than just one!" Jack chimed in, as he skidded to a halt next to Striker. "And we have to find out where he left his ship, so if we help you, we'll find it sooner!"

Cal wasn't exactly comfortable around this large group, but he sighed. "I guess you can help me if you want," he said, turning and walking. "After all, I heard that the Professor told you stories of his adventures. It could be exciting for you to see the memories of the pirate."

"Awesome!" Jack laughed, before he turned to Striker. "Did you hear that? We're gonna see his memories! This is gonna be awesome!"

"Yeah! I bet we'll get to see some sort of epic battle scene!" Striker said.

"It'll be like watching the BEST pirate movie ever!!!" Ani exclaimed. To this, all the kids cheered.

"Alright, calm down now," Cal muttered, just as they came to his bedroom door. Inside, it looked like an ordinary bedroom, but there were a bunch of computer monitors sitting on a large desk, with a computer chair sitting in the center of it all. On the computers, each of them showed different areas of the building; this implied that Cal was in charge of the security on the premises. One of the monitors showed Cream and Charmy, sitting in the living room and chatting.

"Hey look! There's the Captain and Grandma Cream!" Milo said with a point at the monitor.

"Yeah, I can see almost everything that goes on," Cal said, though if they expected the monkey to approach the monitors, they were wrong. Sitting on his end table was a smooth, white orb that Cal picked up. When he held the microchip over it, the orb started to blink with a white glow, and then it scooped up the microchip in a blue barrier.

"Oh yeah, your white ball!" Rudy said.

"White ball?" Striker asked.

"Cal made it himself," Rudy said. "It does a bunch of cool things like show a screen in the middle of the air!"

Jack would have asked how it could do that, if it hadn't been for one deciding factor... "Ooh, it's shiny!" he said, as he observed the white orb closely. "If it's shiny, it has to be good!"

Cal couldn't help but chuckle; Jack was very amusing. Then he started tapping the orb, leaving traces of white glows that shortly faded away. Then, things started popping out of the orb in holographic images that were projected in the middle of the air.

One of which was a video that began playing automatically.

As the video played, they would see Whisker, along with two other robots on his shoulders, marching up to a scepter within a cave. However, after a while, a blue hedgehog, a younger Tails, and a brown raccoon showed up, leading to an encounter that culminated in the raccoon pulling Whisker's moustache, him hurling her across the cave, her finding it hilarious, and Whisker eventually leaving.

"Waah..." Jack uttered when the video ended. "He was after a scepter? What's a scepter, anyway?"

"It looks like I wasn't the only one trying to pull off his mustache!" Ani laughed.

"That was Sonic the Hedgehog!!!" exclaimed Striker jumping up and down excitedly. "That was him!"

"And that was the Professor with him…" Milo said in astonishment. "Wow, he looked REALLY young! This must have been a really long time ago…"

"Yeah, like a million years ago!" Rudy added. "He's OLD!"

"Well, that's not what we want…" Cal murmured, as he opened another holographic window containing a list of videos. He scrolled, up until he found the last one that seemed the most recent. As the video popped up, Cal went to work through something else on the chip that they wouldn't notice, due to the fact all of them would be absorbed in the video.

This video was quite large, showing Sonic, Tails, and a purple cat facing off against Whisker and a greenish torpedo-like bot. As Cal had noted, in battle, Whisker was ferocious, but eventually, Sonic and the cat defeated the two of them, leading to Whisker escaping. However, he was pursued by the raccoon, and after entering a different area, he took her captive, threatening to... tickle her.

"No way! That's just cruel!" Jack chimed in.

Thankfully, Tails managed to fool Whisker long enough for them to rescue the raccoon, which led to the pirate bot entering a massive mecha called Ghost Titan. However, Sonic and the cat managed to

destroy the mecha, though while they couldn't have seen it, Whisker was launched out of the exploding mecha, and the video seemed to cut off...

But that wasn't the end of the video. Soon, the image returned, though it was quite filled with static, indicating that the memory had been damaged. However, it showed a certain metallic hedgehog approaching the fallen Whisker on a beach, his arms folded. *"...another one of Eggman's failures... he wouldn't mind if I took this back for safe-keeping..."* At that moment, the video cut off for real.

Striker jumped when he saw that, "That was—!!!!"

"Let me at him!!!" screamed Ani suddenly, as if Metal was really standing there, and Striker and Milo had to hold her back. "I'll kill him for what he did! I swear!"

"Ani, please!" Milo cried.

Cal recalled that Metal had killed Shadow, so he understood Ani's behavior. "This certainly isn't good," he said. "If he remembers seeing Metal…"

"Then maybe Jill was right that Metal sent Whiskers here!" finished Striker.

Cal actually wasn't going to say that, as his own thoughts were about something else, but he went with it. "Well, everything else seems to be locked up for some reason," he said. "Would you all mind if I tried tinkering with this alone for awhile? I want to see if I can find anything else on here…"

"That's okay with us," Striker said, as he led Ani out of the room, and the rest followed outside.

Once they all left the room, Cal closed the door behind them; and locked it. He was trying to think hard. What he was about to do was very risky now, considering that they saw that. Now the kids were probably going to tell the others in Boomer's room. To this thought, he growled as he punched the door, cursing under his breath.

But nonetheless, he got to work. He sat on his feet to provide help

from his hand-like feet, which messed with the orb to bring up a holographic keyboard that he began typing on, proceeding through different windows.

Activating lethal attack system…

Unlocking and downloading new memory...

…

… *..download complete. A reboot of the system is required to initiate commands from downloaded information.*

"There, that should do it," Boomer muttered, pulling her hands out of the opened up Whisker. Then she wiped her brow, "Geez, I'm lucky you know about this thing more than I do, Professor. Thanks for the help."

"Don't mention it, Boomer." Tails replied with a smile. "Now, all we have to do is wait for Cal to bring the microchip back, and-" At that moment, they heard someone knock on the door. "Ah, that's either him or the kids, I reckon. Jill, do you think you could open it?"

"Sure," Jill said, approaching the door. Once she opened it, she saw the kids. "Hi guys, how'd it go?"

"Well, we got to see his memories," Striker said.

Rudy continued, "Yeah! He was fighting Sonic the Hedgehog, and a much younger Professor, and a raccoon, and a purple cat! He threatened to tickle the raccoon, and then there was this GIANT robot!"

"…then we saw something else," added Milo, who looked desolate.

"What did you see?" Jill asked.

"Well..." Jack began, as he scratched his neck. "...after the giant robot went boom, and the pirate was sent flying... that meany-face Metal Sonic found him on a beach!"

Jill then looked concerned hearing that.

"Looks like you were right Brownie," Brick said. "Though why Metal sent a robot without memory, I can't say."

"Yeah, that's really weird…and suspicious," Boomer remarked. "Jill…why don't you go check with Cal; see if he's found anything else…"

"Sure," Jill said, leaving out the door.

When she was out of the room, Brick started to growl again, and this time, not only was he aware of it, but he continued.

"Um... Brick, are you okay?" Jack asked, as he looked at Brick with some concern.

When Jack asked Brick that question, he stopped growling, but Brick didn't change his expression. "Don't worry about it," Brick said. *They're too young to understand anyway…*

Meanwhile, Tails let out a sigh, before he looked at the deactivated Whisker. *His personality is still the same...* he thought. *...but without Eggman and Nega's orders, he's mostly harmless. What would Metal gain from sending him here?*

"Listen guys, we're going to have to haul Mr. Pirate Captain outside," Boomer said. "If he starts going nuts, I don't want him trashing my room, or grabbing any of my weapons."

"I can help with that!" Ani said, and within an instant, she levitated the shut-down Whiskers with one simple scoop of telekinetic energy.

Boomer jumped, just as she had to duck for Whiskers to float over her. "Good grief Ani!" she blurted. "At least give me a warning!"

Jack could only look up at Whisker in awe when Ani lifted him up, before looking at Boomer. "Do you think I could go get Jill while you're getting him outside?" he asked.

"Yeah, go ahead," Boomer said, following the flying Whisker and Ani like the others.

There was a small knock on Cal's door. "Cal, you there?" called Jill's voice.

Being brought out of thought was frustrating, but since it was Jill, Cal lightened up as he opened the door. "What can I do for you, Jill?" he said.

"How's the search going?" she asked, as Cal allowed her inside. "Find anything yet?"

"No, nothing else," Cal said, even though it was a lie. "I assume that the kids told you what they saw?"

"Yeah, they said they saw Metal Sonic."

"I guess you were right about that then." Cal then sat back down on his bed. "Well, I couldn't find anything, because everything was locked up for some reason. I tried to see if I could hack into it, but no luck." Jill could see that he was fairly unhappy.

"Cal?" Jill said, tilting her head at this.

"Jill, do you think I'm a mean person?" he asked suddenly. "I mean, the way I acted to Boomer is just because I live here with her and Rudy, and they're like my brother and sister, but…"

Jill sat down beside him. "What's wrong Cal?" she asked.

Cal looked at her. Then he took off his glasses, showing his bright yellow eyes. "I feel like a bit of a failure," he said, looking away from her, looking ashamed. "I used to be able to figure stuff out really quickly, but I can't figure out this one…I just can't think straight."

"Cal, you're not a failure," Jill said, setting a hand on his shoulder. Then Cal put his hand on her hand, and she froze in surprise while he looked back at her.

"I know why I can't think straight though," he said, as he looked at her deeply.

Jill started to blush. She knew Cal enough to know this was unexpected of him, and she wasn't sure what to say, as Cal came closer.

"Jill," he said. "I can't think about anything else but you." His yellow eyes were piercing into her, and Jill was beginning to get butterflies. She was even starting to think that Cal looked a little cute without his glasses.

So she didn't stop him from kissing her. It was gentle, but overpowering…

...and at that moment, the door was opened, and in walked Jack, who at first didn't notice this. "Jill, we're all ready to fix his memo-" he began, just as he noticed just what was going on. "...did I interrupt something?"

"Jack!" Jill jumped away from Cal, red in the face with embarrassment.

Even Cal was surprised, nearly tumbling onto the floor when Jill jumped away from him. "Well, uh...Jack, um, did you come for the, uh….microchip?" he croaked, as he put his glasses back on, adjusting them hurriedly.

"Well..." Jack said, as he scratched his neck. "...I guess? I just showed up to tell Jill that Boomer's done working on the pirate robot, so we can fix his memories... but what were you two doing again?" he asked quite innocently, despite his age.

Jill very well couldn't answer, seeing as she was left without words right now.

"Uh…it's just one of those grown-up things, Jack," Cal finally said, as he took up the microchip from the end table. "You'll learn when the right time comes…"

"Um... okay." Jack said with a shrug, before suddenly pumping his fist into the air. "Now come on, we're gonna fix the pirate's memory!" he said cheerfully.

"…sure," muttered Cal, raising an eyebrow at Jack. "Let's get to it

then."

So the two of them followed Jack down the hall quietly. Jill was still speechless and really embarrassed at being caught, even though she didn't really kiss Cal back. Right now, she was trying to think about what just happened since it was really fast.

Then she lost her train of thought when she felt something stroking the back of her leg. She looked to see it was Cal's tail, and once he noticed this, he took it away hurriedly. "Sorry, it has a mind of its own," he whispered.

Jill looked away shyly. That was awkward alright…

Then they made it outside, seeing the group gathered around Whiskers.

"Hey, guys! I got Jill and Cal!" Jack called, so that the group could notice them, even though they would have done so on their own.

Regardless, Tails turned his head to the trio, and gave a nod. "You got everything checked on, Cal?" he asked.

"Well, I wasn't able to find much on it; things were locked up," Cal said. "But after trying everything else, I installed a program that might open things up. It'll require a reboot when I put the microchip back into Whiskers though…it might take a few hours."

"Well what're you waiting for?" Boomer said. "Stick it back in Whisker already."

"Fine, fine…" groaned Cal, as he approached the robot to do just that.

Brick then noticed how quiet Jill was. "Brownie, you okay?" he asked.

"I…don't know," Jill replied hesitantly.

Jack couldn't help but tilt his head, as he heard the tone Jill replied to Brick with. *Is that part of those grown-up things Cal talked about...?* he thought.

Brick glanced at Cal as he inserted the microchip, then he looked back at Jill. "He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

"He…" Jill couldn't continue without blushing again. So Jill had to whisper it into Brick's ear, which provoked a very noticeable reaction.

" *WHAT?!"* Brick screamed.

Which was enough to startle Jack, making him fall right to the ground. *I don't think Brick wanted to hear that...* he thought.

Out of the entire group, Brick would be most likely to be the most impulsive, and in this case, it would be confirmed. Once Cal had completely injected the microchip in, and he was sure that it was now beginning the reboot process he mentioned earlier, he turned to see Brick marching up to the monkey, quite angrily. Then the bull stuck his face in Cal's. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't do this," he muttered, just as he grabbed Cal. "After all, it's like you said. All's fair in Love and War."

Then Brick socked Cal in the face as hard as he could.

To this, Jill gasped in utter shock. "Brick?!"

But that didn't stop Brick. He continued to punch Cal in the face, and the monkey allowed himself to take the blows; not because he could defend himself, but for the sake of secret strategy.

"Brick?!" Quickly, Jack ran up to the bull, getting between him and Cal, keeping him from punching the monkey. "Hey, what's wrong? You can't just punch people like that; it's a mean thing to do!"

Brick huffed angrily. Cal was lucky that Jack had broke in between the fight, otherwise, it would have ended quite ugly. Cal was wiping his bloody nose, but he shot the bull a quick evil smirk before he went back to acting helpless.

"That was totally uncalled for!" yelled Rudy, who looked at Cal as his best buddy. "What did Cal ever do to you?!"

"Yeah, what did he do to you?!" Jack repeated, as he placed his

hands on his hips. "You're not acting like the Brick I know! You're acting like... a meany!" he added.

"Now, now, stop fighting amongst yourselves." Tails suddenly shot in, as he looked at both Brick and Cal with a disappointed expression on his face. "Both of you are setting a bad example for the children." he added, before glancing at Cal; he had noticed the smirk the monkey had given Brick. "When we're done with Whisker's memories, I'd like a talk with you two."

"He's not even going to listen Professor," Cal said. "His skull is too thick."

"Why you--!!!" Brick shoved through Jack and Rudy to pick Cal up and punch him again, before—

"THAT'S ENOUGH!"

Everyone jumped, hearing Jill's voice speaking at an unusually loud tone, and that was enough to make Brick stop, as he looked over at a stern Jill. "I don't know what's gotten into you Brick," she said. "But you need to get yourself under control!" Once Brick dropped Cal, Jill didn't bother to stop. "Do you remember how much we went through?! The LAST thing we need is for you to lose it!"

Jill's scolding was...unusually hard on Brick, even if he didn't show it. It was enough to simmer his temper, which was for sure.

Jack blinked, as he looked at Jill with a shocked expression; he wasn't used to seeing Jill act that angry before, so it had thrown him off his guard completely.

Brick turned away from Jill then, as he suddenly didn't have the strength look at her. Rudy helped Cal back onto his feet.

"How long will that rebooting process take, Cal?" Boomer asked. When the monkey looked at her, she was grinning. He gave her a dirty look, but it didn't dimish that smirk off her face at all. So Cal finally decided to ignore it.

"A couple hours," he said. "Whiskers will start back up probably around the afternoon. There's not much else we can do until then,

except leave him alone." He wiped his bloody nose again, and tried to sniff up the rest.

With a nod, Tails closed his eyes. "It looks like we'll have to wait, then." he said, before he turned towards the HQ. "Let's go inside." he added, before throwing one more glance at Brick and Cal, which by itself practically said out loud 'I'll see you two later'. Then, he, along with the kids, headed back.

With Boomer and Jill outside with Brick and Cal, the monkey was the first one to start walking back towards HQ after the kids. In Cal's opinion, it was worth it. Jill yelled at Brick, and it might start getting worse if Brick decides to act like that again. He'd just have to find other ways of drawing out the bull's anger.

Once Cal was out of hearing range, Boomer looked over to Brick. "If you ask me, I think he deserved it," she remarked.

"It doesn't matter," Jill said coldly, which took Boomer by surprise. "I don't ever want to see you do something like that again Brick."

Brick didn't answer. He still kept turned away from Jill, too ashamed to look back at her. Getting no response, Jill turned back around and headed toward HQ as well. Boomer looked at Brick for a long time. "Are you going to be alright?" she asked him.

"No," Brick said directly, finally turning to HQ once Jill was inside.

Chapter 7

CHAPTER SEVEN – BETRAYAL

It was later now. Both Cal and Brick finally gathered into the living room, sitting on opposite sides of the room with not only Tails, but Charmy as well, as the Captain of the CDA had been informed of the incident.

"Now..." Tails began, as he tapped his finger against his elbow, his eyes closed. "...I'd like to know, Brick; what possessed you to begin attacking Cal like that?" he asked, without opening his eyes.

Brick stubbornly remained silent, looking away at the wall grudgingly.

Charmy grew a bit impatient with him. "Brick, you're going to have to tell us sooner or later. We're not going anywhere until we sort this out."

"...he kissed her," he finally admitted, though he more like spat it out in disgust.

"Really..." Tails uttered, though his eyes remained closed. *A matter of jealousy... somehow, I'm not surprised.* he thought, before he opened his eyes. "Is that the only reason?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

":...yeah."

"Brick," Charmy started. "We don't want drama going on just because you two are fighting over a girl. There are children here for heaven's sake; think a little bit before you act." Then Charmy turned to Cal. "As for you," he said. "You're not off the hook either. There's obviously something else going on between the two of you."

"I'm entitled to my own feelings, Captain," Cal said. "I merely told her how I felt and expressed it."

"Well, you were moving awfully fast on her!" Brick blurted.

"That's enough!" Charmy yelled over the two of them. "You two really do need to shape up, or there will be more severe consequences then the trouble you're already in. Think I can't be strict? Try me."

"For now, both of you should apologize to one another, and promise us that neither of you will cross the line." Tails said, as his expression went from neutral to stern in mere moments. "And I do mean that; if we hear of any more trouble between you two regarding Jill, as Charmy said, the consequences will be dire."

"Him first," Cal stated, looking at Brick with a glazed look. "He's the one who punched me."

"You know what?!" Brick yelled, jumping to his feet. "It's not the fact that you're after Brownie, but it's more then that. I don't like you one bit; because I have a feeling in my gut deep down that you're going to hurt her. A brainiac like you can easily manipulate anyone you want with ease without a care about their feelings, and with the fact that you're always locked up in your room is enough reason to be suspicious. I can't trust you at all!"

Charmy rose to his feet too. "Brick, you're WAY out of line!"

However, Charmy would feel his arm being tugged, as Tails pulled him back into his seat. "I don't care who apologizes first..." he said, in a strangely dark tone for him. "...but do it, and leave it at that; I'm growing impatient with both of you."

They both let out a sigh of frustration, and for awhile, it was silent again. "...Sorry," Brick finally uttered first, though he said it quite distastefully.

"Ditto," Cal replied, finding a way to avoid saying the exact word.

Sighing, Tails closed his eyes. "...Charmy, would you say that they've learned their lesson?" he asked, looking at the bee with a more neutral look.

"For now," Charmy replied. "Just no more trouble, you hear?"

"Yes sir..." both of them said simultaneously, and then Cal got up.

"I'm going to check on Whiskers," he said, walking away out of the room. "It's probably been long enough." But Brick remained where he was, glaring at Cal as he left, and then he peered down at the ground.

When Cal left, Tails let out a sigh, before looking up at Brick. "Keep your head up, Brick." he said bluntly, before he stood up as well. "I suppose Cal might need some assistance with Whisker, so if you'll excuse me..." he said, before he went out the same way Cal had.

"Brick, I trust Cal. His brilliance is the core of our recent success in the agency," Charmy said. "He might seem like the scheming type, but he really is--"

"I'm sorry Captain, but you're not going to convince me of what I should think of him," Brick said, rising to his feet as well. "I'm going to spend some time alone, thinking." And then he, too, left the room, leaving Charmy alone in the room.

To this, the bee sighed. "The love problems we had to deal with were Sonic and Amy's endless chase; nothing like this." Then he chuckled to himself. "Ah, good times."

Cal and Tails entered back outside, seeing Whisker was still shut off and motionless. However, Cal knew that any moment now, the pirate would awaken. And so he did, as slowly, his eyes began glowing, and he placed a hand on his head. "...arr..." he moaned.

"Now, let's see if he remembers anything..." Tails muttered, as he kept an eye on Whisker.

At this time, something unsettling happened. Cal began to smirk that same, evil smirk he had given Brick not too long ago. "Hello Whisker," he said.

Removing the hand from his head, Whisker looked at Cal. "...good tide, Calculate." he said, as he got to his feet. "How be ye doin'?"

Blinking, Tails threw a calm glance at Cal, not showing his uneasyness.

Then Cal turned to Tails, continuing to grin that evil smirk. "Whisker, you remember your objective? Well, you now have my permission to carry it out; starting with him."

"Understood..." Whisker said, as he slowly began approaching Tails and Cal. "Commencin' objective: Termination."

Tails didn't even flinch at this reply, as he kept looking at Cal, before placing his hands behind his back. "...care to explain yourself, Calculate?" he said in the same neutral tone he had carried throughout the conversation earlier, as Whisker continued to approach them, slowly raising his fists.

"All I can say is, you should've trusted Ring-face when you had the chance," Cal said.

"Not saying anything else but that?" Tails said, before closing his eyes, just as it seemed that Whisker would bring down his fists upon the old fox. "...truly a shame, Calculate..." Then, Whisker swung...

...and missed, as Tails suddenly spun his two tails, giving him enough speed to get away from the mighty attack in time, the pirate only smashing the ground where Tails once stood. "...now you've crossed the fine line, and made me lose my patience." he said in a dark tone, before glaring at the monkey, just as he pointed his clenched fist at him. "I want to have a talk with you, young man." he spat, just as he pressed the hand, allowing a red arm cannon to envelope his hand. "Right now."

Cal gulped. He didn't expect Tails to move that fast, as he was deceptively old. But Cal didn't show his discouragement, as he drew out his white sphere. "I'm done talking," he said. "I find that it wastes valuable time." Then when his thumb pressed down on the orb, it began to blink rapidly, and then it broke apart, with the pieces plastered over Cal as a smooth white jumpsuit. Then a mask was created for him, and it finished to a point where Cal looked like a white ninja. He even held out his hands and from streams of data-like energy, two long katanas appeared in his grip.

"C'mon Whisker," he said, swinging his two katanas around for demonstration. "Let's get some chores done. Metal wants us to be thorough."

"As ye wish..." Whisker uttered, as he cracked his knuckles, glaring at Tails, who kept his eyes on Cal. "I be gonna smash th' lad's like ye wouldna-"

At that moment, however, a sphere of electricity was shot straight at the large pirate, striking him dead-on, and basically short-circuiting the robot, making him go offline in mere seconds. "I may not be in my prime..." Tails said, as he had merely moved his aim a little to strike Whisker, without breaking his calm stance. "...but it's going to take more than a fancy suit and a pair of blades to kill me, Calculate." he added, his dark tone still present, before he aimed at the ground before the monkey, just as something else was fired out of the cannon; exploding toy mice, with the intent of creating a dust cloud.

Once the dust cloud emerged, Cal kept alert throughout the dust. Part of him was wondering whether or not it was a good idea facing Tails. He kept a firm grip on the hilt of his katanas.

However, once the dust cloud dispersed, Cal would find that Tails was no longer standing where he once stood, almost as if he had vanished into thin air. At that moment, however, he'd hear a conspicuous beeping sound coming from right below him, and what sounded like an electrical surge from above him. He would soon find out first-hand where those sounds came from; the surge came from three orbs of electricity being launched right down at him, and the beeping came from three small mice having made their way below his feet.

First Cal rolled around the orbs of electricity that were launched at him. Then he hopped up into a tree to avoid the mice, all when he searched through the sky to find Tails. "Whisker, WAKE UP!" thee monkey screamed.

"Ungh... huh?" Whisker uttered, as the shock from Tails' attack had worn off. "What jus' happened?"

"Not much; I was just teaching our friend Calculate here a lesson in manners." they could hear Tails' voice say, and before anyone could make out what was going on, Tails landed on top of Whisker's head, before aiming the arm cannon at the tree, firing more exploding mice at the monkey.

Cal maneuvered around the tree quite agilely, and whenever a mouse would hit him, he'd slash it in half with a katana, causing it to explode before him, though that was better than having the explosion actually touch him.

"So, you said something about Metal Sonic, Calculate." Tails began, as he suddenly began shooting electric orbs at the tree instead of mice. "How long has it been like that? Ever since you joined the Chaotix?"

Meanwhile, Whisker looked up at Tails, who was still standing on his head, and slowly clenched his fists. *C`mon, jus' stay still, ye pesky critter...* he thought.

"Now Professor, do you think I would be that low?" Cal, as he started hopping through the different trees around them to avoid the orbs of electricity. "No, I joined the Chaotix an honest man. I just got into some trouble, so Metal decided to cut a deal with me."

Then Cal leaped out of the tree, and attempted to swing the katanas at Tails.

However, as he slashed, Tails began spinning his tails, taking off into the air, leaving Cal's attack to strike Whisker instead, just as Whisker attempted to strike Tails on top of his head, leading to him taking more than one blow. "Argh... ahoy, watch 'ere ye swin' them blades, Calculate! Ye nearly cut me hat open!" he called angrily at the monkey.

"And what sort of trouble was so dire that you decided to sell out your friends to a dictator like him, Calculate?" Tails asked in mid-air, though now, he didn't fire at Cal. *...I can handle Whisker by myself, but Cal's bound to overwhelm me soon.* he thought, before looking back at the HQ. *Maybe... no, I can't take that risk. I can't let him...*

"Sorry Whisker," Cal growled, glaring at Tails. Then he answered the old fox's question, "Well, let's just say I made a nasty slip-up that I needed help cleaning up, and Metal was willing. He also found use of my intellect and trickery…"

Then he stopped a moment, noticing Tails looking back at the HQ building. "So if you'll excuse me, there is a prize Metal wishes for me to steal…like a certain girl." And with that, Cal threw down a smoke bomb, and by the time the smoke cleared, he was gone.

Tails had a clear, shocked look on his face. *No... Jill!* he thought, before he looked towards the HQ. *I need to alert them!* Then, all of a sudden, he fired an explosive mouse in the direction of the HQ, and while it wouldn't strike the building, it would alert those inside of it.

"Ahoy! Dasn't think that I be done wi' ye, ye wee-" Whisker called, as he rushed at Tails, but the fox quickly fired another electrical orb at the pirate, short-circuiting him once more.

"That takes care of that..." Tails muttered, before he began flying towards the HQ as quick as he could muster. "I can only pray that they heard the explosion..."

"Come on, Boomer, why won't you play hide-and-seek with us?" Inside of the HQ, Jack and the kids were trying to convince Boomer to join their games, but so far, they hadn't been successful. "Be a sport, please?"

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?" begged Striker.

"No thanks guys," Boomer said, clearly growing ill-tempered with all their pestering. "I don't want—!" Just then, she stopped. She heard a loud noise coming from outside, which sounded strangely like an explosion.

"Hm?" Hearing the sound, Jack looked around. "...is it fireworks?" he asked, before throwing his hands up in the air, laughing happily. "Yay! Cal and the Professor got us fireworks! We've got to go and see them!"

"That's not fireworks," Boomer said, looking dire. "That sounds more like—!"

"What in the world was that?!" asked Brick, running up.

"It came from outside," Boomer said.

Brick looked shocked. "Cal and the Professor just went out there to check on Whiskers!"

Boomer turned and headed towards her room. "I knew it," she said. "That robot's gone ballistic." It took a moment for her to enter her room, and then she popped back out…

…with an enormous Gatling gun. "Brick, stay with the kids and keep them safe!" Boomer said, running through the hall.

And before any of the kids could protest, Brick grabbed them and pulled them down the hall into another bedroom, shutting the door behind them. Coincidentally enough, Jill was in the room. "What's going on?!" she asked in alarm.

"Whiskers started attacking!" Brick said. "Boomer went out there with one of her guns to help the Professor and Cal out there!"

As Brick explained this out Jill, Jack blinked, as he tapped his fingers against his forehead. "Wait, she's going out to beat a robot... by herself... and the robot was from..." he muttered, trying to piece things together, when something dawned on him. "...Brick, we got to help her!" Jack eventually said, as he looked at Brick with a horrified expression.

"No, you guys have to stay here," Brick instructed.

"No! I wanna go out there and help them!" Ani protested. "I'm tired of you guys telling us to stay back while you go and get hurt! I'm strong enough to take them!"

Brick jerked her by the collar of her hood, and brought her close. "You might have a lot of power Ani," he said. "But you are WAY too inexperienced to fight! Do you guys remember trying to fight Metal Sonic? What if that robot is just as strong as him?! As far as I'm

concerned, the only one that was able to fight Metal Sonic was Brownie!"

Ani grew angrier. "I bet that Jill couldn't pick up our entire tree house with both hands behind our back!"

"That's my point Ani," Brick said, letting her go. "Your powers are way too destructive. Shadow's may have been the same way, but he had better control of it!"

Ani had a long history of arguing with Brick, and right now, she was getting angrier. After what Metal Sonic did to Shadow, she wasn't going to let that happen to anyone else.

"But Brick..." Jack began, as he looked at the door for a moment, before looking back at the bull. "...this is just like what happened with Uncle Shadow! He fought a bad robot alone, got hurt, then we got there, and..." Then, he clenched his hand into a fist. "Whatever the case, I'm not gonna let what happened to Uncle Shadow happen to Boomer, too!" Then, before Brick could even stop him, he barged out the door, headed out after Boomer.

And that was a cue for all the other children to follow Jack in inspiration, cheering; especially Ani who let out a battle cry as she ran.

"GUYS!" Brick screamed, starting off to try and catch them. But something else stopped him before he could even get out the door, as a muffled scream from behind caught his ear. "Brownie?!"

He whirled around, only to find it was too late. Jill had fallen unconscious due to a hankie held to her mouth; damp with a drug. Cal caught her as she fell, but being a white ninja, Brick didn't know it was Cal right away, as he couldn't stop the white ninja leaping out the window with Jill in his arms.

Seeing those hand-like feet gave Cal away though, and realizing it infuriated Brick. "GET BACK HERE YOU SON OF A—!"

"I wouldn't want to finish that sentence, if I were you, Brick." an elderly voice interrupted, and right outside the window, Tails was

hovering, his arm cannon aimed directly at the monkey. "Now, let her go, Calculate." he said as calmly, yet still as incredibly intimidating as one could get.

"You wouldn't shoot me with her in my arms," he said, though there was a hint of doubt about that, as the monkey continued to climb up the building, juggling Jill between his four hands and tail as he climbed.

And Brick poked his head out the window to see this. He knew he couldn't climb like Cal, so it was no use following him up that way; however, he had a feeling where the monkey was going, so he turned and left the room as quickly as he could to try and beat Cal there.

"What makes you think that I wouldn't?" Tails replied, though it was bluffing, for the most part; *if he harmed Jill... no, it couldn't come to pass like that.* With a sigh, he flew up after Cal, keeping his cannon aimed at him. "You're going to deliver her to Metal, I presume?" he said. "You do know what Metal intends to do with her, right?"

For a minute, Cal actually hesitated. The truth was, his feelings for Jill were real, and however irrational it is to take her to Metal, the metallix had Cal's hands tied behind his back. Cal didn't answer Tails' question, but he returned to climbing the building.

That was about the time that Boomer came out of the ground entrance, and at first glance, she noticed that Whisker wasn't active. Confused, she turned around, and then she discovered the scene on the side of the building.

"Professor?!" she blurted.

Around that time, Jack and the kids stormed right out after Boomer, and as he looked up at where Boomer looked... "Professor! Jill! Ninja!"

Ignoring this, Tails flew above Cal, glaring down at him. "Answer me! Do you even know what he's planning to do with her? Doesn't she mean more to you than that?"

Cal didn't even bother looking up at Tails. "He intends to keep her safe," he said, though whether or not he really believed it or not was unknown. Finally, he reached the edge of the helicopter pad, and for an instant, he threw Jill up in the air to flip onto his feet on the surface of the helicopter pad, and then he caught her.

"I knew I couldn't trust that damn monkey," growled Boomer, as she was not really aware of the fact that she was present before children.

"Ooooo, she said a bad word," whispered Striker to the others.

"Wh-what do you mean, Boomer?" Jack asked her, as he hadn't pieced together that the ninja was Cal yet. "Monkey... so the ninja is Cal? But why does he have Jill?"

Tails growled lightly, as he closed his eyes. "Do you really believe that, Calculate?" he said, as he flew closer, his arm cannon still aimed at the monkey. "What makes you think that he won't just kill you when you've delivered her to him?"

Cal still didn't say anything, as he began walking towards the helicopter. But then, the door burst open, with Brick barging out, and the bull stood in Cal's way of the helicopter with outstretched arms. He growled. "I thought you had real feelings for her, but I guess not! Well, I won't let you take her away!"

Cal stopped walking, glaring at Brick. "I don't let my feelings interfere with my work, unlike *some* people…"

"You!" Brick couldn't control himself, and he started charging forward after Cal.

Though what Tails would notice that Brick wouldn't, Cal slowly reached for the hilt of one of his katanas.

Tails' eyes widened at the sight of this, though he wasn't foolhardy enough to rush in between Brick and Cal; instead, with a heavy sigh, he aimed the arm cannon at the monkey. *Forgive me, Jill...* he thought, as he fired a series of electrical orbs at the monkey.

Cal foresaw this, so he ducked. The electrical orbs struck down

Brick instead, stopping him in his tracks as he collapsed, and Cal stepped on his head as he ran for the helicopter.

"Screw this," Boomer said, as she tossed aside her Gatling gun. *Time for that fail-safe to play into effect,* she thought, as she looked over at Whisker. "Whisker, I order you to wake up, activate the override function in your body, and stop Cal!"

At that moment, Whisker suddenly sprung up, and after a short while... "Yes, ma`am! Consider 't done, ma`am!" he called, before he looked up at the helicopter, and with a single, surprisingly large bound, he leapt all the way to the roof, landing smack-dab on the helicopter, crushing it before Cal could hope to enter it. "How would ye like yer arse-kickin' today, chimp?" he said, before standing up, turning to glare at Cal.

Seeing this, Jack was awestruck. "Wow... when could he do that?"

Boomer smirked.

As for Cal, he was awestruck as well by that sudden turn of the tables, and he was lucky enough that his expression was hidden behind his mask, as he staggered away from Whisker. Then Brick gained his strength, and he reached over and grabbed Cal's tail with a painful yank. As Cal yelped, he dropped Jill, and before she could hit the ground, Tails quickly caught her in his arms, before getting a safe distance between them and Cal. Letting out a sigh of relief, Tails looked back at the scene, as Whisker slowly marched towards Cal, much in the same way he had approached Tails earlier, his arms raised over his head, ready to strike.

In a matter of quick thinking and amazing strength, Cal pulled Brick with his tail, causing him to let go as he hurled him at Whisker. Then as he took out something within his hands, he threw it down and the minute it hit the ground, it let out a blinding flash. When the flash was gone, so was he; Cal being nowhere at all in sight, and naturally, some were surprised, to say the least. "Uh? Hey, 'ere`d th' damn chimp go?" Whisker uttered, as he pried Brick off him, looking around for Cal.

Tails frowned, as he threw a glance at Jill. "...we should get inside."

he said, before walking towards the doorway into the house, Jill still in his arms.

"Hey, he's gone!" Striker said, as he watched Tails, Brick and Whisker leave inside.

"Well, at least they got Jill back," Boomer said. "Let's go back inside guys." Once the duck picked back up her large Gatling gun and heaved it over her shoulder, she headed for HQ.

"How does she hold that thing up, anyway?" Jack mused, before he and the kids followed Boomer inside the building.

Striker shrugged. "Maybe she's super strong?"

"I know she gets super *angry* ," Milo added with a slight shiver.

Once inside, they found Tails, Brick, and Whisker in the bedroom with Jill, who had been placed on the bed. "Professor! Brick!" Striker exclaimed.

"And Whisker!" Rudy said, hopping up and down wildly.

"Yeah, aye, 'tis me..." Whisker said, as he nodded lightly.

"Wh-what's wrong with Jill?" Jack asked, as he looked at her worriedly. "Is she..."

"She'll be fine." Tails said, as he looked down at her body. "She was knocked out by a dose of chlorophome, or something similar to it, so likely, she'll wake up soon..."

"But...why did Cal try to take her?!" asked Rudy. "I thought he was our friend!"

"He wouldn't say why, but..." Tails began, as he sighed, folding his arms. "...he had cut a deal with Metal Sonic some time after he joined the Chaotix, and he likely intended to use Whisker to kill us, while he took Jill to Metal."

"You mean..." Jack uttered, as he nearly collapsed from shock. "...that Cal was a bad guy? And he lied to us?"

"As shocking as that is to hear that... I can't say anything but yes." Tails replied.

"He lied to us…" Rudy said, sounding sad. Everyone else was utterly shaken by that; Boomer just grunted, looking at a wall. She didn't like Cal at all, so this wasn't really as much of a surprise to her than the rest.

"Brick, is that why you hit Cal?" Milo asked.

"I didn't like him, but I didn't know that he was working for Metal Sonic," Brick said. "I punched Cal for a different reason…" Sitting by Jill, he stared at her. "…Cal did something to Brownie," he finally said. "I'm not going to say what; because you guys are too young, but what Cal did to Brownie…it upset me when she told me. I don't know if I told you guy this, but…Brownie's very special to me. I was afraid that Cal was going to hurt her somehow, because I knew he wasn't a very nice guy, and I wanted to keep him from hurting her."

Boomer looked at Brick curiously. She could've figured Brick had feelings for Jill after observing them when they arrived, but the guy was actually confessing them in front of these kids.

"Wait…so, you like Jill?" Ani asked in astonishment. "As in… *like* like?" Even her eye brow rose when she asked that.

"Uh…" Brick turned red again. "…yeah, basically."

"EW! BRICK LIKES COOTIES!" Striker, Milo, Ani, and Rudy screamed all together, before they started laughing. Then the four of them started to hop around in a circle with joined hands. *"Brick and Jillian, sit-in' in a tree! K-I-S-S-I-N-G!!!"* they sang.

Brick grew panicked as he tried to shush them down, turning an even more noticeable shade of red, "SHHHHH! Not so loud! You'll wake her up!"

Surprisingly enough, Jill didn't wake, but only turned to her side.

Tails couldn't help but chuckle, before he looked at the singing kids. "Now, now, Jill needs her rest, so you'd best not make too much noise." He said, waggling a finger at them.

Whisker, on the other hand, merely groaned. "Sheesh... had t' be some o' that mushy stuff, didna 't..." he muttered.

Though it would have been opportune for Jack to begin singing along with the others, he didn't, as he only looked at the very red Brick. *...so it's like those grown-up things Cal said I wouldn't understand yet?* he thought, as he scratched his head.

Boomer tried to hold in laughter. She knew that was going to happen when he told these guys, and she could've saved Brick some of the embarrassment. "C'mon guys," she said, though now reluctantly because… "…I guess I'll play hide-and-seek with you."

"Seriously!?" exclaimed Rudy, who had been brought out of his misery. He looked up to Cal, and so he had been disheartened by the news that he was a double agent. But he still had Boomer, at least.

And before she could think twice about it, they grabbed her wrists and dragged her out the room. "Whoa!" she uttered.

This caught Jack off-guard a bit, but nonetheless, it brought him to reality. "Yay, hide-and-seek!" he laughed, as he ran after the others.

"Heh... kids these days." Tails chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "So very full of life... reminds me of back in the day..."

"Hey, I dasn't want t' brin' bad news t' th' table, but..." Whisker shot in, as he folded his arms. "...do ye guys think 't`d be safe, fer me t' stay here?"

Brick looked up at Whisker. "Well, that's pretty much your choice," he said. "After all, you've got a pirate ship to find…and we won't stop you from looking for your ship and your crew."

"Nay, nay... no point in that, really." Whisker replied, as he threw a glance at Tails. "Thanks t' th' old fox zappin' me, I caught some o' me memory aft, an'... well, I doubt that I`ll find anythin' in this time an' age. But I be wonderin' if 't be safe fer ye swabbies if I stayed."

Hearing this, Tails tilted his head. "How do you figure?"

"Well, if Metal Sonic be th' one who sent me here, I`d assume that he has technology t' track me down wi', an'..." Then, Whisker scratched the back of his head. "...well, I wouldna want t' be havin' ye guys gettin' in trouble o'er me."

Brick smirked. "Actually, Boomer found something of the sort, but she was generous enough to take it out. She wouldn't have found it if it weren't for the Professor and as far as I'm concerned, you're safe."

"...really?" Whisker uttered, as he looked at Tails in disbelief, though the fox simply nodded in response. "That's..." he said, before placing his arm against his eyes. "I canna thank ye swabbies enough!"

Brick smiled. "No need for thanks," he said. "I'm sure the others would like a pirate captain around. It'll make things up around here interesting, that's for sure."

"Maybe ye're right..." Whisker mused, before he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Ahoy, maybe I could join them kids in some hide-an'-seek? In fact, I'll do that right now!" Then, he ran out the door, actually intent on playing with the kids.

"Seems like there's some things not even time can change..." Tails chuckled, before he looked out the window, his expression darkening a bit. "I do wonder where Cal ran off to... judging from what he said, he may have been forced into working for Metal."

"Yeah, maybe," Brick said. "I wouldn't think he'd be the type to stand up for himself anyway…" Then he looked back at Jill. "What I don't get is…why he'd do this to her. Do you think Cal lied about having any feelings for Brownie?"

"...no, I don't," Tails replied somberly, as he looked back at Jill again, "which is what truly has me worried. If he was willing to hand her over to Metal, despite what he would do to her... though he tried having me killed and her kidnapped, I fear for him."

"Sounds like he's not right in the head if you ask me," grunted Brick apathetically. "Good riddance then…" Finally, Brick got up from the bed. "There's no way I'm going to let anyone hurt her; not Cal, not

Metal, not anyone…" then he headed for the door.

It was nighttime, high up in the atmosphere of the city heights. He sat there on top of the tallest building in the city, staring down at all the lights below, with a slight sense of remorse. But he knew it had to be done. Drawing out a communicator, he pressed down a button.

"Metal," he said. "I managed to get some DNA samples of her when she was asleep, and I sent them to you shortly after. However, it cost me my cover, and Whisker is not in your control anymore."

However, eerily enough, there was no reply.

Cal sighed. He figured as much, and even though he was afraid, he stood up from where he sat. "So I accept punishment for my mistake," he murmured to himself.

"Sorry, what was that? I didn't quite catch that." a voice from behind Cal said, and lo and behold, there stood Neo Metal Sonic, his arms held behind his back, and his gaze directed at the sky above them. *"You wouldn't want to roll that last part by me once more?"*

"I said, I accept punishment for my mistake," Cal spoke up, without looking back at Metal. His hands even started shaking, so he clenched them into fists to keep them still.

"You do, now?" Metal mused, as he walked next to Cal, still looking up at the sky. *"Tell me, SNITCH, do you remember how you came to be in my servitude?"*

"Yes," Cal replied obediently. "In order to save me from my first mistake, I agreed to work for you."

"And what was that mistake?" Metal asked, without looking at the monkey.

Cal hesitated, and then, "…my mistake was…letting someone guilty of their crime go free. A case I should have solved came undone, and all because of sympathy and feelings for the girl who should have done her time. You ensured that she received her sentence, in

order to keep my mistake hidden from the Chaotix."

" *Good, good..."* Metal nodded, before he finally turned to face the monkey. *"And seeing as you made another mistake, what do you think your punishment will be... Calculate?"*

"...whatever punishment you see fit," said Cal.

"You are indeed a quick learner, Calculate." Metal chuckled, as his arm slowly turned into a blade. *"And though you did give me the DNA of our dear friend Jill, you managed to not only lose control of Whisker, but you failed to kill Miles Prower, or anyone else, for that matter. Now, what do you think I'm going to do to you?"*

"...I think you're just about to administer my punishment now," he uttered, shutting his eyes. *Jill...I'm really sorry,* he thought. *You deserve much better than me...*

"My dear Calculate..." Metal chuckled, as he raised the bladed arm upwards, preparing for a slash as Cal shuddered...

...but the slash never came. Neither did any damage to Cal's body, as Metal had morphed his bladed arm back into a regular one. *"...you're wrong."*

Cal slowly opened his eyes. He refused to look back at Metal though, even if he questioned why Metal held it back. "...I am?" he asked.

"Oh, you really do not get it, do you?" Metal chuckled, as he grabbed hold of Cal's chin, lifting it so that he was forced to look upon the Metallix. " *Do you honestly think that I would kill you? Let you off the hook so easily? Calculate, you are now an enemy of the Chaotix, of Prower and his grade scholars... of her. You cannot face them without being labeled as my underling, and they will take necessary action to stop you. In short, you're stuck with me. Capuche?"*

"...I understand," Cal croaked.

"Good." Metal nodded, before he let go of the monkey. *"However, as I see it, you're unfit to serve me... in your current condition."* he said,

before turning away from Cal. *"Even with your fancy ninja outfit; you failed to even scratch anyone but Whisker. Why do you suppose that is, Calculate?"*

Cal didn't answer right away. He wasn't even sure how to answer that question. "Because, I..." and then he trailed off.

"It's not a matter of what you did wrong, Calculate." Metal said, as he turned to face Cal again. *"Rather, it's the limitations you face with your physical body."* Then, he placed a hand on Cal's shoulder. *"When I am done with you, Calculate, there will be no conceivable way for you to fail me ever again."*

Cal just looked at Metal now, in slight disbelief. "What are you going to do to me?"

Metal merely chuckled, as he stepped away from Cal. *"Let's just say that when we're done... you'll be reborn."* That would be the last thing Cal heard, as something suddenly struck the back of his head, not with enough force to be lethal, but with enough to knock him out, and Cal blacked out in an instant. Before Cal could collapse, however, a series of silvery tendrils surrounded his body, those tendrils protruding from Metal . *"Now... let's get started."* Then, he flew off, carrying the monkey with him.

Chapter 8

CHAPTER EIGHT – GETTING TO WORK

" *Dear Diary,"*

" *Two days ago, Shadow the Hedgehog passed away. He was a beloved friend who served a long time in life, but now he is finally resting. I wonder how long ago Shadow wanted to die…it's a terrible thought, I know, but being immortal can drive someone insane. It only proves how strong Shadow was, especially with a past like his."*

" *Then yesterday, we came to the Chaotix for help, only to find that one of their members had double-crossed us, and supposedly worked for Metal. I missed what happened since I was unconscious, but once I woke up, everything was explained to me. I can't believe Cal would do something like this…and after what he said to me; after kissing me."*

" *I wasn't sure at all what to say to his feelings, but the truth was I didn't really feel the same way. It just didn't feel…right to me, especially after what we found out about him. It's a shame what became of him. No one really knows just how Cal came to work for Metal, but now he's no longer around for questioning. It looked like Captain Charmy took it pretty hard when the news reached him. Not only did Cal help the agency to flourish and thrive in business because of his smarts, but he was also a valued friend."*

" *Although Cal is gone, Whisker seems to make up for that. He made fast friends with the younger ones, and he's not at all bad. We might have lost an ally, but at least we gained another one too; but Boomer is her same old self. She doesn't trust Whisker as fully as the rest of us…I wonder why she doesn't like robots so much. Considering she's a weapon's specialist and mechanically gifted in other areas, you'd have to wonder."*

" *But my mind is still wrapped around that battle I had with Metal that fateful night."*

" *Purity; an energy that intertwines with Chaos."*

" *It suddenly came to me that night, just like my powers suddenly did. More so, it feels like this may have been something I forgot a long time ago, and now I'm trying to remember; and not that I made myself forget like those who have traumatizing pasts, but its like my memory was taken away from me. The real question is why. Why is it coming back to me like this?"*

" *I've never been so fixated on my past like this. There are still some unknown elements to it I don't understand, but now that my powers have returned, I feel like I'm beginning to get some answers. I fear for what's to come though. Even though there haven't been sure signs, I fear the possibility…"*

" *The possibility of Deity Novagod returning."*

" *My mind will be occupied with other things, though. After using most of yesterday for recuperation, we're ready for our search for the Chaos Emeralds. At least being with the Chaotix allows us some resources, which gives us some fair ground to stand on in this battle."*

" *Captain Charmy was even nice enough to give me an empty notebook for this diary entry, since my diary was left at the Clubhouse, and we can't really go back there, can we?"*

" *Well, may there be luck to all of us."*

An arctic wind blew past her as she stomped through the snow up the hill that day. The moment she reached its top, she was brought before a magnificent view of a snowy valley. Jill didn't know just how high up they were, but she could see a lot, and she marveled at the view. "So, this is the Ice Cap Zone," she muttered. Zones, which she had only heard about from Tails, were a wonder even to this day. Not even the fox and his friend, the legendary Sonic the Hedgehog, could figure them out.

"Woo!" Striker was the next one to make it to the top of the hill, and with a sled in his hands, he flopped down stomach-first on it to slide down the hill.

"C'mon Milo!" Ani said, as she tried to convince the timid lion to climb onto the sled she was sitting on.

"Nuh-uh," Milo shook his head hurriedly after looking down that slope. "After those mine cart rides, what makes you think I'm going down the hill with you?"

Ani then shrugged, "Suit yourself." She gave herself a push with her telekinesis and down the hill she went. "Wait for me Striker!"

"Wooooow!" Jack uttered, as he looked around at the massive, snowy landscape, as he eventually got up on the hill next to Jill. "Lots of snow! Come on, Jill, let's make a snow castle!" he laughed, before he ran down the slope after Striker and Ani.

"Brr... how aren`t ye guys feelin' this?" a robot said, as eventually, Whisker climbed up the hill, his arms wrapped around his body, looking down at the others. "I be feelin' 't, an' I be a machine! That`s jus' crazy, right?" he said with a glance at Jill.

Jill didn't get a chance to answer as Boomer made it up, with the Chaos Radar in her hands. "Guys!" She called down at all the kids. "We're not here to play in the snow!" But seeing as they weren't listening, she groaned.

"Now Boomer, let them have their fun," Brick said, being the last one to make it to the mountain. "After all, they aren't going to be kids forever."

"I realize that," Boomer said. "But if we really want to get those emeralds, we need to hustle. Anything can happen in these zones…"

"Ah, relax, ma`am!" Whisker said, as he looked down at the duck. "Th' worst things around parts like this be avalanches, an' as long as ye dasn't shout ever' word ye say, ye`ll be fine." After what had happened last night, Whisker had constantly referred to Boomer as 'ma'am', likely from her overriding Cal's modifications, and for some reason, Whisker saw only Boomer as his superior. This fact seemed to annoy Boomer, because she felt like that not only did the kids follow her wherever she went, but this gigantic robot as well, and

Boomer didn't really like robots. She figured she'd get used to it though, as she let out a sigh.

"Well, I'm going to go ahead and start looking around to see if I can find any signals," she said, trotting down the hill. "C'mon Whisker..."

"Aye, ma'am!" Whisker said, as he followed the duck down the slope.

Jill took in a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. Being this high up in altitude cleaned out her sinuses a great deal; well, not that she had sinus problems before. It just felt good. It was refreshing, actually, and Jill felt relaxed being up here. Noticing this, Brick smiled, feeling like that was a good thing for her.

"So, how hard do you think finding the Chaos Emeralds will be?" he asked her.

"Not sure," she replied, as the two of them started down the slope as well. "With that radar, and somehow the fact that I can sense the emeralds, maybe it won't be as hard as we think it'll be."

"Wait a minute," Brick stopped. "You can sense the emeralds?!"

Jill studied Brick's expression before she realized she never told them much about that night at the temple. She chuckled sheepishly, "Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you guys that…"

"It's that Purity, isn't it?" he asked her.

Jill looked at Brick thoughtfully, before she turned out to the valley. "Maybe…" she muttered. Purity intertwined with Chaos; it made sense.

"Jiiill! Briiick!" they'd hear Jack call out, as he and the kids had actually begun constructing a snow castle. "Do you guys want to help us out?"

Jill giggled. "Sorry guys. I'd like to, but I have things to do."

"Aw!" they groaned.

"Actually Brownie," Brick said, setting a hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you go ahead? You can help them build a snow fort and I'll go help Boomer and Whisker find the emerald."

"Really?" Jill asked, looking back at him.

Brick nodded. "You've done a lot lately, and you could use some playtime yourself." He smiled, which caused Jill to smile too. Even if Jill could sense them, like she said, she deserved a bit of a break.

"Well, alright, if you insist," she said.

"Yay!" all the little ones cheered.

"Awesome!" Jack chimed in. "Hurry, Jill; we're gonna make a snowman later on!"

Jill giggled some more, joining them. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll help!"

"Heck, with me, we can make an entire snowman army!!!" Ani exclaimed, hopping up onto a pile of snow. "You will all bow down to me!" she said, with her hands on her hips standing tall. "I am the ultimate Dictator of Snowy Mountains, with the most epic snow fort eva!"

"Where?" asked Striker, scratching his head.

Then Ani chuckled evilly. "Oh, you'll see the Epic Fort…in 3 seconds!" As she raised her hands coated with blue telekinetic energy, the snow began to shift violently. Soon, piles and piles of it began building up and clumping together, until it eventually formed into visible architecture. Then the architecture sharpened, turning into a giant, white castle walls.

Brick stared at this with small eyes. "Holy…"

"Tada!" She proclaimed, as the energy faded away from her hands.

"Woah, that's awesome!" Jack laughed, before he scooped up some snow. "Alright, snowball fight!" he called, as he threw the snow right at Ani.

Ani simply stopped it with her telekinesis. "Ha-ha!" she said, as she began to imitate acting from an old school martial arts movie. "Your-snow-balls-are-no-match-for-my-power!" However, she wasn't paying attention as another one hit her in the head from behind. "Hey!" she said, turning to see Jill laughing.

"Sorry, but there is one who surpasses you, young one," Jill said, as she picked up some more.

And Brick turned back down the hill going where Boomer and Whisker had left, as a flurry of snowballs flew back and forth between all the others up there. He shook his head with a smile, "Kids…" At some point, finally, he found Boomer and Whisker.

When Boomer saw him, she tilted her head questionably. "Where's Jill?"

"With the others," Brick said. "I figured she needed a break, and at least there's somebody watching them."

Boomer shrugged, "Fine by me, I guess."

"So, 'tis only us three lookin', huh?" Whisker mused, as he looked at Brick, before chuckling. "Quite th' crew, I`d say. So, ma'am, gettin' any closer signals?" he asked, as he looked at Boomer.

"Not yet," Boomer said with her eyes locked on the radar. "But it looks like we're going the right direction." Boomer started taking a few steps on. "If we just keep going this way then we'll—!!!" She was all of a sudden launched up in the air, leaving the radar to fall on the ground, screaming on her way up.

Looking down on the ground, Brick saw a red jump-spring with a star on it which stuck out of the snow in a way that implied that the snow had buried it. Clearly, this was what sent Boomer flying, and when Brick looked back up, Boomer was on her way back down.

"Ma'am!" Whisker called, as he looked up at Boomer as well. "D-dasn't worry; I`ve got ye!" Then, he ran to the spring, and surprisingly, it launched him right up towards Boomer, letting him catch her in mid-air. "Aha! Be seein'? I got ye..." he began, when he

noticed that he was beginning to descend as well, which would mean... "...oh... in hindsight, maybe I ortin' ta be havin' thought this —" And Whisker promptly landed smack dab in the snow, getting his lower half stuck in it completely, but he held Boomer so that she didn't get any snow on her.

"Impressive," remarked Brick after seeing that amazing feat.

Boomer was pretty shaken after that, but luckily she wasn't hurt. Once she got back on her feet, Brick came and helped her as they tried to pull Whisker out of the snow. "What did I tell you?" she grunted as she pulled Whisker by the hand. "These zones are unpredictable."

"Well, 't got ye by surprise, ma'am..." Whisker said, as the two eventually got him out of the snow. "But at least 't didna cause an avalanche! That would ben quite a damper! Yar har har!" he laughed, placing his hands on his hips... "...'tis cold!" And then he immediately folded his arms, as if he was actually freezing.

Boomer raised an eyebrow at Whisker, wondering why a robot felt the cold.

In the meantime, Brick scooped up the radar from the ground and started surveying the surroundings. After a minute, he discovered other jump-springs that were positioned on the walls, and through calculation, he figured out that they were in a path through the air, which eventually led to a ledge and a tunnel. "Hmmm…."

"What is it Brick?" Boomer asked.

"If the zones are unpredictable," Brick said, stepping closer to the spring, "then we'll roll with it. Just like a certain blue hedgehog from long ago." He didn't comprehend the strength of the spring, so when he jumped on it, he shot like a speedy bottle rocket. This time, however, instead of straight up, he went the path he had discovered earlier, hitting the other springs and then finally landing on the ledge up high.

Boomer was surprised, and when Brick was on the ledge she called out to him, "What are you doing?!"

"Hey! The signal's stronger!" Brick laughed, ignoring Boomer's question. "We gotta go down this tunnel over here!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Whisker called after Brick. "We canna jus' go on that way, ye know! Ye could cause some kind o' avalanche, an' that`s th' last thin' we need!"

"As I said, we gotta roll with it!" Brick said, being careful about how loud he shouted. He also had a big grin on his face.

"Brick! That's not what he meant! You can't—" Boomer finally groaned when the bull disappeared down the tunnel, and she rubbed her brows in irritation. "These things haven't been used in a long time," she muttered. It was no use arguing with Brick, now that he ran off. "Well, I guess we have to follow him," she said. "He's got the radar."

"Alright, then, ma'am..." Whisker nodded, before he cautiously took hold of Boomer. "Excuse me if I be too rough!" Then, he ran on the spring Brick had bounced off, and very soon, both Boomer and Whisker were bouncing on springs all the way to the ledge and the tunnel.

Once on the ledge, the two of them went through the tunnel. On the other side, they emerged into another area with a lot more ledges, and a lot of different ways to reach them. One path was marked with more jump-springs; another way had an obstacle with icicles over spikes that popped in and out. On that particular icicle obstacle, Brick was trying to climb his way across, clenching the radar in his teeth.

Boomer flinched when she saw Brick doing that. "What are you doing now?!"

Brick very well couldn't answer with the radar in his teeth, but he tried to reply, "Ahm clihmin mah wahv to vfa ofver ledsh!"

"…what?!" Boomer couldn't understand him.

"You`re clingin' t' a leash?" Neither could Whisker, but at least he tried to make sense out of it. "That dasn't e'en make sense, Brick;

ye`re holdin' onto a bloody icicle!" he called.

"Nehber mimb," he grumbled, as he hopped onto another icicle, and then shortly, another one. Boomer didn't even ease up until Brick safely landed on the ledge he was heading for. Then he pulled the radar out of his mouth. "Blech," he hacked. Radar didn't taste good…

"Hey now, what's this?" he suddenly said, as he spotted some sort of switch on the ground of the ledge he stood on.

"DON'T!" Boomer screamed, which shook the place somewhat just by her voice.

"Aah, dasn't be so loud, ma'am!" Whisker said cautiously, before he looked back at Brick. "Ye heard Boomer, Brick; dasn't touch 't!"

"Too late!" He said, hopping right on the button. Luckily enough, it wasn't anything bad. In fact, after the place shook, which was plenty nerve-racking for them, a big bridge of ice was placed before them, which led Whisker and Boomer straight to the ledge that Brick stood on.

Boomer stomped across the bridge, looking at Brick with a deadly glare as he only continued to smirk. Then she stopped right in front of him, giving him the glare. "...you're despicable," she grumbled.

"Well, that takes care o' that..." Whisker muttered, before he looked at he bull. "So, Brick, how about givin' Boomer th' radar now?"

"Okay, fine," he said, just as Boomer swiped the radar out of his hands.

"And you put this thing in your mouth," Boomer growled in disgust, though when she took a look at it, she lightened up. "Hey," she said. "We're actually pretty close..."

"That`s great news!" Whisker said, before motioning for Boomer to go ahead. "Lead th' way, ma'am!"

Boomer looked back down at the radar, and began to follow its trail with Brick and Whisker following.

In the meantime, the kids and Jill had a blast. Thanks to Ani's telekinesis, not only did they really create an army of snowmen in a matter of seconds, but she allowed them to move and come alive, armed with snow guns that shot snowballs. After awhile, the army was defeated, with Ani standing atop the last fallen snowman. "We did it!" she said. "We saved the fort!"

"Woohoo!" cheered Striker, jumping for joy.

"Awesome!" Jack cheered, pumping his fist in the air. "We have to celebrate! Let's make a camp fire and roast marshmallows!" he said blissfully.

Jill laughed nervously. She didn't exactly like fire...she was a pyrophobic in fact. "I don't think we can make a fire in the middle of the cold," she said, adding some reasoning, since they didn't know she was afraid of fire. "Anyhow, maybe we can—!!!" She suddenly stopped. Something came over her, and it felt drastic. She fell to her knees, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Jill, are you okay?!" Striker asked. "Is it too cold?!"

"N-no," Jill replied. "I felt something else..." Something very disturbing. She wasn't sure what, but it was coming from her otherworldly senses. It felt like a tingle of some sort and a very bad one.

"You feel it too?" Jill was surprised to see Ani doubled over the same way.

"H...how are you feeling it Ani?" Jill asked.

"I know this feeling," Ani said. Her ears drooped in despair, and she looked scared. "I get this feeling whenever something bad's about to happen," she said. "I never really know what, but I always get this feeling before that bad thing takes place..."

Jill was utterly confused, but whatever feeling she was getting was gradually growing worse. She figured Ani could feel it because she was a psychic, but Jill wondered why she felt it too.

Jack blinked, as he looked around, trying to see if he could hear anything out of the ordinary. "...I can't hear anything... maybe we should move up the slope?" he inquired, looking curiously at Jill.

Jill tried to figure it out. She wasn't a psychic, so why did she and Ani share this feeling? The only sixth sense she had was connected with Tails' dead friends and the Chaos Emeralds and... "We have to go find those three!" she said, jumping to her feet once she figured it out. If she felt it too, that could only mean that the emerald they were looking for...

"Wh-what's wrong?" Jack said a bit worriedly. "You... you don't think that Brick, Boomer and Whisker are in trouble?"

"They will be, if we don't get there!" Ani said, as she started running down the path. "Hurry!!!"

"This is weird," Boomer said. "The radar says it's supposed to be around here, but I don't see it."

"Not out in the open," Brick remarked. "What if it's hidden? I'm sure it might be buried under the snow..." The three of them had reached a wide open area in the middle of the valley, with some evergreens scattered here and there, and it was a dead end in the middle of all the mountains. The emerald had to be here, but like Boomer said, it wasn't anywhere in plain sight.

"Well, duh!" Whisker said, as he folded his arms, shaking his head. "If ye`re goin' t' hide booty, ye be havin' t' either place 't in a overly-complicated temple, labyrinth, dungeon or whatere, or ye be havin' t' bury 't!" Then, he rubbed his chin, as he looked thoughtfully up at the sky. "An' th' temple`s usually filled wi' various death traps... but that`s besides th' point." he said as he shook his head, before looking at the ground. "Th' point be, we be havin' t' dig. But 'ere...?"

"Anywhere's good," Boomer said, as she got down on her knees and started digging through the snow.

To this, Brick shrugged. Then he too started digging in the snow.

"Aah, time t' do what seafarin' heartys do best!" Whisker laughed, as he got ready to dig, when he stopped himself. "Well, besides pillagin'..." he uttered, as he actually began counting on his fingers. "...an' robbin'... an' sailin' th' seas... an' quarrelin' wi' ninjas... an' I forgot 'ere I be goin' wi' that. Diggin' time!" Then, he immediately returned his attention to digging in the snow, though being both much larger and a machine, he got a bigger hole much quicker than Brick or Boomer.

Brick stopped a minute when he saw this, eying the size of the holes Whisker dug with shock. *Good god,* he thought with a blink.

"C'mon Brick, we don't really have all day," Boomer said, noticing that he had stopped.

Snapping out of it, Brick went back to digging.

Later on, when they had dug everywhere in the ground it seemed, Boomer got up. "Well, I give up," she said, as she started tapping the radar. "This thing can't be broken…"

"I found it!"

Boomer was surprised when Brick shouted that, and she came by quickly to watch him turn up something. When Brick pulled it out of the snow, it was indeed a gem; brilliant cut. There was a strange thing about this one though…

…this one was black.

"A…black Chaos Emerald?" Brick said, surveying it.

"Strange... I canna reckon seein' somethin' like that." Whisker mused, as he observed the emerald. "But if 'tis a Chaos Emerald, we ortin' ta take 't wi' us; maybe th' fox could enlighten us, or somethin'."

Boomer looked it up on the radar, and indeed, it confirmed that the signal was coming off of it. Though suddenly while looking at it, her eyes widened. "Wait a minute! It says that there are TWO of them in the area! That black one is one of them, while the other is…above us?"

And then she looked up at the sky.

"Surprise." Yes, above them, Neo Metal Sonic hovered, his arms folded, and a glare directed at the three of them. *"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."*

"You..." Whisker uttered, as he glared up at Metal, before he stood before Brick and Boomer. "Ahoy, ye two, stay aft!" he said, as he stretched his arms out, trying to shield them.

"How noble... you know, this reminds me of something from before..." Metal mused, as he held up one finger, a small tendril appearing out of its tip. *"Care to guess what I'm reminded of right now?"*

Brick hid away the black emerald on his person making sure that it remained safely with him if any rough-housing would happen.

And Boomer…well, she whipped out a big hand gun from nowhere, twirling it in her fingers. "I heard a lot of things about you and what you did," she said to Metal. "Do me a favor. Tell Cal I think he's a slimy, little bottom feeder for me, would ya?"

"Why don't you just tell me that yourself, Boomer?" Something descended down from one of the trees, and due to the fact that it was clad it white, it was not noticeable before with the snow to camouflage with, but it was Cal. Even though he looked the same though, the three of them would get a strange impression that he was different than before…

"Now, now, let's not call each other by insults." Metal said, as he began descending, his arms still folded. *"I only came for the Emerald, so if you would please hand it over, I won't maim you all beyond recognition."*

"Listen, ye two..." Whisker said, as he made sure that he blocked Brick and Boomer from view as much as he could. "...do nay go past me, alright?"

In the light of things, Boomer was willing to listen to Whisker much more than Metal, so she regarded a nod to Whisker. Brick too,

though reluctantly.

"Not going to comply, are you?" Metal sighed, as he folded his arms. *"Look, I'm giving you a chance to live. Give me the Emerald, and I will not kill you. This is your last warning."*

Whisker growled, before he blinked. "...Brick, place th' emerald in me hand. I got a feelin'..."

Slowly and surely, Brick drew out the black emerald and put it in the hand that Whisker held behind his back. Boomer cocked her gun to ensure that it would be ready for fire.

Cal only watched them silently, and then… "Do I have your permission, Metal?" he asked, turning to the metallix.

"...very well." Metal sighed, as he turned his back to them. *"Calculate... you may-"*

"BURN, BABY!!!" Whisker roared, as all of a sudden, a massive stream of fire shot out of his mouth, aiming to engulf both Metal and Cal, despite the former not even moving to dodge this.

Cal hopped up into the air, and the minute that he pulled off a flip in the middle of the air, his back suddenly shot out jet fuel. It was later realized that he had some sort of jet pack. All the fire did a good job melting all of the snow though. Some of the trees even burst up in flames, but Cal was untouched.

Metal, on the other hand, was immediately engulfed in the massive flame storm Whisker brought on.

"Yeah!!! That`s what ye get, Metal Sonic!" Whisker laughed, as the flame continued spewing out of his mouth. "How do ye like... them... apples?" However, much to the shock of the pirate, and likely the shock of Brick and Boomer, the flames divided around where Metal stood, as a shield

protected him from damage.

"...as I was saying; kill them." Metal said coldly, without even looking at Whisker's attack.

"Yes sir," Cal responded, drawing out his katanas.

"Not so fast!" Boomer said, as she started taking shots at Cal with her large hand gun, though with the advantage of being in the air, Cal was able to evade the shots with ease. With his katanas in hand, he started to charge the three of them for a slice…

….then from out of nowhere, something else shot at him that interrupted him. He caught it in an instant, seeing that it was a golden arrow.

"It's not nice to pick on people, Metal!" came a childish shout, which appeared to be Striker, and next to him was Jill, who held her bow up, and she was getting ready for another shot.

"...Jillian. You're far too early." Metal said snidely, as he pointed a finger at Jill. *"You'll have to excuse me, but I can't have you firing at my subordinate."*

"You leave th' lass' alone, ye hunk o' scrap!" Suddenly, Whisker ended his fire breath attack, and in an instant, shot his fist out at Metal like a rocket, though he still held the emerald safely in his other hand.

Thankfully, Metal hadn't anticipated this attack, and while it hardly even scratched him, it did knock him off balance. *"...I keep forgetting your strength. Must be because of your lack of intelligence."* he muttered, before looking back at Whisker.

"Hey, stop calling Whisker dumb, Metal!" they heard a different voice say, and as it turned out, it was Jack, who also stood by Jill with a determined look on his face.

Now Ani appeared by Jill's side. "I'm gonna make you pay for what you did to Shadow, Metal!!!" she yelled, emitting a mass of telekinetic energy around herself.

Cal simply looked at them, with his katanas firmly in hand. Mostly he looked at Jill.

And Jill looked back at Cal, while she pulled an arrow back to aim at

him. "Cal, I don't know what got into you," she said. "But you have the right to know, that I didn't feel the same way about you." Then she released the arrow, which Cal moved aside from.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Cal said. "Maybe it wasn't meant to be then…" and then he came for them, spinning around like a drill with his swords out to get them, and then he struck a blue barrier, courtesy of Ani.

"Hey monkey boy!" Ani said. "Leave my friends alone!!!" She took her hands, and clapped together. The minute she clapped, it released a powerful wave of force that blew Cal back quite a distance, though it was apparent that no damage had been done. "That's the tele-clap for you!" she exclaimed, unaware that she hardly did anything to Cal.

"Hmph... you honestly think you can beat us?" Metal mused, before he turned to face Whisker. *"Pathetic. Shadow couldn't best me, even with six Chaos Emeralds . What makes you think that a second-rate robot, a handful of kids and teenagers can hope to defeat us?"*

"I know one thin'..." Whisker said, as his fist returned to his arm, before he butted his fists together. "I be Captain Whisker, an' I be nay second-rate; I be th' ruler o' th' seas!" Then, he shot another stream of flame at Metal, but once again, a shield covered Metal, protecting him from harm.

"Ruler of the seas? Please; you do not even have a ship." Metal scoffed, as he began walking through the flames, closer to Whisker. *"And the only ruler around here is me, not a lowlife such as-"* At that moment, the flames subsided, and Metal saw that Whisker had rushed at him, throwing a punch at his face. *"...cheeky ba-"* was all he managed to say, before the fist struck him dead-on, sending him propelling away, though he stopped in mid-air.

"Yeah! Go get him, Whisker!" Jack cheered. "Show him who's boss!"

"You were saying, Metal?" Brick said, smirking, although his smirk was wiped off his face when Cal lunged at him with his sword, and he had to dive onto the ground to duck. Then the monkey landed on

his feet, but before he could try another swipe at Brick, Boomer started shooting him with her hand gun.

"I never really liked you," Boomer said. "So I'm going to enjoy this!" Cal started doing some swift back flips to avoid the oncoming fire that Boomer was dishing out at him. Then when Boomer had to reload, Cal took the opportunity to hurl one of his katanas at Boomer in a massive twirl that would have been too fast to dodge, that is, if it hadn't been shot away by one of Jill's arrows.

Hearing Metal's statement about Shadow brought a response from Jill. "Metal," she said. "Maybe you forgot the battle we had." She didn't make it sound arrogant, and it sounded pretty serious, as she aimed a few more arrows at the metallix.

However, Metal was quicker, and effortlessly dodged Jill's attacks. *"How could I forget? I just chose not to refer to it; there is a difference there, Jillian."* Then, he returned his attention to Whisker, who was cracking his knuckles, ready for a brawl. *"In any case, we're done with games. Calculate, take care of Whisker."*

Since no one was shooting at him, Cal had the opportunity. With katanas outstretched, they started to emit some electricity from the blades. "Yes sir," he replied to Metal. With one leap in the air, his jet pack boosted him forward towards Whisker, as he tried to take a slice at the robot.

However, Whisker noticed Cal attempting to strike him, and surprisingly nimbly for one his size, he avoided the attack. "The wee ninja`s got a spine, 't seems! Let`s be seein' how 't handles a fistful o' power, chimp!" he laughed, before aiming a strike at Cal.

Cal spun around Whisker's attack to rebound with another attempted slice.

And while they were dealing with each other, both Boomer and Jill each started to shoot at Metal. "You have an emerald that we'd like as well!" Boomer shouted.

Metal, however, simply remained in place, as the shots bounced off a barrier formed around him. *"You'll have to try harder to obtain it,*

then." he said snidely, as he looked at the fight between Whisker and Cal.

At that moment, Whisker attempted to back away from the attack, but the katana scratched his knee a bit. "Tsch... eat this!" he roared, as he shot another stream of fire at Cal, at basically point blank range.

Just as the fire consumed around Cal, one would think that the monkey would be toast. However, that was not the case. "No thanks," he spoke. "Too crispy for my taste." Once the flames were gone, they would see that Cal's white jumpsuit had burned away, and it revealed something shocking. Cal had no flesh whatsoever. The surface of his skin was that of a cybernetic body, somewhat scorched thanks to the flames Whisker spewed out, but nonetheless, not a scratch of damage.

Seeing this, a lot of people were shocked. "What happened to him?!" Boomer asked.

"That is my handiwork." Metal said, as he chuckled. *"Using technology Eggman devised to turn Mobians into Metallix versions of themselves, I adapted it into a system that would allow me to rebuild anybody from scratch... what you see is the result; Calculate the Monkey, reborn."*

Jack blinked as he saw this. "Cal's... a robot?"

Whisker scoffed, as he reeled his fist back. "I doubt that ye`re fully machine, chimp. Be havin' some real steel!" Then, he threw a devastating punch right at Cal.

And even more shocking was that Cal stopped Whisker's fist with his own hand without so much as a struggle, while Cal gave Whisker a sharp look. "You lack discipline, Whisker," he said. Then clenching down on Whisker's fist, Cal hurled Whisker into a tree. Once he slammed against the trunk, he tried to come in for another slash with one of his katanas.

As Cal slashed, however, Whisker lifted his own hand to counter, as a buzzsaw emerged from his gauntlet, colliding with the katana.

"Pirates dasn't need discipline! We make do wi' what we got!" he said, before he got on his feet, slashing at Cal with buzzsaws emerging from his gauntlets.

And Cal matched buzzsaws with katanas, as the two proceed with a duel.

While they were busy with that, Boomer was reloading her hand gun. *With that barrier up, there's no way we're going to just shoot him down,* she thought, looking at Metal. Then she turned to Brick. "Battle with Metal?" she asked, recalling what Jill said. "What did Jill mean by that?"

"She fought Metal, even when he had all seven emeralds," Brick replied, whispering so only Boomer heard him, "and somehow…she won."

"Really?" Boomer asked with widened eyes. Now she looked over at Jill, who watched Cal and Whisker battle with a serious look on her face. She also stopped shooting at Metal, knowing it was useless if the metallix had a barrier up.

Metal, too, watched the intense duel between Whisker and Cal, with his arms folded. Then, with a sigh, he suddenly rocketed in between Cal and Whisker, separating the two of them. *"Enough games, Cal... why don't you leave Whisker to me. You can either sit and wait... or kill Jill."*

Cal looked at Metal, and then he looked towards Jill. It looked like he was trying to consider it.

"He wouldn't…" Brick uttered in disbelief.

Oh, but he would. Cal gave Metal a nod, and started charging towards Jill.

"Look out Jill!" Ani cried. "I'll—"

"—No Ani," Jill said. "This is my battle." Once Cal tried to slash her, Jill blocked it with her bow.

Metal scoffed, before he looked at Whisker, pointing his hand at him.

"Both of us has a Chaos Emerald... this should be a fair fight."

"Don`t take me lightly, Metal Sonic. I can still kick yer arse around th' block!" Whisker laughed, before he and Metal began slashing at each other.

Cal tried to cut Jill, but she either blocked it with her bow, or she whirled around it. "Cal, you make it seem easy," she said cynically. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"What is with you?" Cal asked her. Then he came forward and took a very severe slice at her…

…only to hit a green barrier. Cal was shocked, as Jill gave Cal the same sharp look that Cal had given Whisker earlier. It even made the monkey shudder a little. "I've been through more than you can imagine," she said, as a small wind began to surround her. "Compared to that, this is fun!" she said.

"Hrm... Cal, you're not trying hard enough." Metal uttered, as his eyes gave out a red glow. *"Do not hesitate; show her your full power."*

"Don't look away!" Whisker roared, as he suddenly stabbed a buzz saw at Metal, letting the blade grind against the Metallix. "How do ye like that?!"

"Not good enough." Metal replied half-heartedly, as he didn't even move from where he stood, still looking at Cal. *"Go on; go all out."*

"Woah..." Jack uttered, as he looked at both Cal and Jill. "That's..."

Cal wasn't sure about it now. However, Metal had tampered with his mind a little bit, as well as his body, so as Metal ordered he started to turn it up. The jetpack on his back started to increase in jet fuel usage, and he tore at Jill madly through a boost charge.

But no matter how quickly Cal tried to hit her, it always hit a barrier rather than Jill, and she didn't look like she was breaking a sweat at all. She only smiled. "What could he possibly do to make you better,

Cal?" she asked insultingly.

"Shut up!" Cal said, as this was starting to take an effect on him. Deep down, he was still conflicted. That mistake he made…he couldn't let them get in the way. And the fact that Jill was mocking him wasn't helping at all. Finally, he withdrew the katanas. In his palm, there was a small opening, and when he pointed his palm at Jill, it blasted out a huge ray. This was hard enough to shatter Jill's barrier and send her flying backwards.

Metal laughed. *"Perfect."*

"JILL!" Whisker called when he saw Jill being shot away like that. "Why ye... ye leave th' lass' alone, ye overgrown primate!" he yelled, as he began running towards Cal, when all of a sudden, he stopped.

"Weren't we fighting?" Metal chuckled, and as it turned out, a silvery tendril was now pierced through Whisker's body. It was hardly enough to deactivate the large robot, but it surprised him. *"Or does the pirate actually have compassion for others?"*

Jack was stunned when Jill was knocked back, before he glared at Cal. "You... you big bully!" he growled, before he suddenly whipped his harmonica out. "I'm gonna make you pay for lying to us!" he said, before he began playing the instrument, and with the microphone on, a shockwave emitted from it, aimed straight at Cal.

Cal's jet pack sent him up in the air, easily avoiding the attack Jack sent. The tremor it caused, though, had a pretty amazing impact against the side of the hill. Something unsettling started occur, for even if it could not be seen, the vibrations traveled through the ground, and up the hill, eventually up the mountain…

The ray hit hard enough to shot Jill into a wall of snow, and she was struggling to climb out of the cold hole that she was shot into.

"Brownie!" cried Brick, running to her aid.

And the next thing Metal would see is the tendril being snapped in half by a shot, releasing the pirate captain. Boomer was at the side with her hand-gun smoking, implying she had made the shot.

"Listen, trash-heap!" she said, twirling the hand gun in her fingers. "Keep your tentacles to yourself!"

Then that's when there was a loud sound. It sounded like a low rumbling, like something coming down the mountain, and the longer it progressed, the louder it got to a point where everyone noticed it.

Cal looked up the mountain, and grunted apathetically. "Hmph…an avalanche."

Indeed, for the sound was a wave of snow that was heading towards the group at a rapid rate. Considering that the area they were in was the center of a valley, it may be nearly impossible to avoid the avalanche; those who couldn't fly anyway.

"...oh, unholy..." Whisker uttered, as he looked upon the incoming avalanche. "That's gonna be a problem..."

"Hmph... not at all." Metal scoffed, as he folded his arms, looking at the incoming avalanche. *"Cal, let's retreat for now. We'll pick up the remnants when the avalanche dies out."* Then, he flew up in the air, well out of the range of the avalanche.

Cal took a look back at the ones below as he was already in the air, and then at Jill, who was helped out of the snow by Brick. "…Yes sir," he said, as he went ahead following Metal.

"What are we going to do?!?!" panicked Milo, as he ran around. "We-we gotta get out of here! We gotta find a way—!"

"There's no way we can get away in time," Boomer said solemnly.

Though with Milo running around, Ani grabbed him to stop him. "You're embarrassing me Milo," she groaned with a roll of her eyes. Then she oozed out telekinetic energy. "There may not be enough time," she said, "but that doesn't mean we're done for. Everyone gather up; hurry!"

With a nod, Whisker rushed towards Ani, before looking towards Jack, who seemed horrified at the incoming avalanche. "Jack, snap ou' o' 't!" he called, but to no avail. "Oh, fer... hang on!" Then, he quickly turned to get Jack, picking him up, before rushing towards

Ani. "Ye can get us all ou' o' here, Ani?"

"Uh…not exactly?" Ani replied with a shrug. "But I can save us from the avalanche!"

"Well whatever you're going to do Ani," Brick said, pulling Jill to the rest of them. "Do it now!"

Ani's eyes began to glow. Her hands tensed, and the entire group could sense a tremendous power among them. The snow was just about on them now, and most of them shut their eyes. Brick squeezed Jill, which somewhat surprised her a bit.

To Metal and Cal though, they would just see the tidal wave of snow engulf the group in a dramatic fashion. Cal watched in silence; he wasn't exactly sure what his response to this was, so all he could do was watch.

Metal, however, merely sighed. *"So sad..."* he mused, as he folded his arms. *"...be prepared, Calculate; if I'm not mistaken, they're not done yet."*

Cal glanced at Metal, and then looked back down at where the snow had taken the group.

Meanwhile, farther down below underneath all the snow, there was a small bubble of space. The small space was held by a blue wall of telekinetic energy, thanks to Ani. The others would discover that they were still alive, thankfully.

"...that be a close one." Whisker sighed, before he looked at Ani. "But how long can ye hold this up, Ani? `Tis nay like we can dig our way ou'; we`ll all be crushed."

But Ani didn't respond. Her eyes were blindly aglow with blue light, and she remained motionless.

Brick finally let Jill go. When he glanced at her, he quickly turned away blushing, and Jill noticed this. She even slightly blushed herself, but she shook out of it.

"Hey, Ani?" Striker said, as he was about to tap Ani on the shoulder

when—

"Don't!" blurted Jill, which startled Striker. "She's using all of her concentration to hold that barrier up. Disrupt her, and that barrier will fall; then we'll be crushed."

"Brilliant," groaned Boomer, as she started pacing around.

"Then we`re stuck here?" Whisker groaned, before he placed Jack on the ground. "Great... I could be havin' used me flamethrower t' melt our way ou', but wi' th' barrier in th' way, I dasn't be seein' that happenin'."

At that moment, Jack collapsed to his knees, looking at all the snow around them. "...did I do this?" he uttered.

Jill grew concerned. "Jack," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders. "Think of it this way. If we figure out a way to get out of here without Metal knowing, then we can get off easy."

"Yeah," Brick said. "We just need a way to…teleport out." Brick rubbed his chin with a bit of an idea. "Whisker, you got that emerald right?"

"Aye..." Whisker nodded, as he held the black emerald out to Brick. "But how be we gonna use this t' warp ou'? As far as I know, none o' us know Chaos Control, or anythin' o' th' sort."

Jack, however, didn't respond to Jill, as he could only look at all the snow surrounding them. "I..."

"But we don't know that everyone can't use Chaos Control unless they've tried," Brick said, though he said it in such a way that he was implying something. At last, he looked at Jill. "Brownie, you said Purity was tied with Chaos, right?"

Jill turned to Brick. "Yeah," she said.

"Then maybe if you tried, you could use Chaos Control…" Brick said.

"That's not a bad idea," Boomer said. "Worth a try."

Jill thought so too. Heck, if she could tamper with the emeralds and stop a super, she might be able to pull off a simple Chaos Control. So she came to Whiskers to get the emerald…

…and then she saw it. She stopped dead in her tracks, staring at it.

Whisker blinked, as he looked at Jill curiously. "...oi. Jill, ye feelin' alright?" he asked, as he looked at the emerald.

Jill blinked, and she looked very uneasy. *No, it can't be…* she thought, shaking her head. "Y-yeah, I'll be okay," she said, even though she was hesitant on taking the emerald.

"Brownie," Brick said, looking at Jill worriedly.

"No, this is the only way," Jill said. She clenched the black emerald tightly. Then with concentration… "…Chaos Control!" The black emerald began to glow with a strange dark glow.

Cal's head perked up. He sensed something just then.

"...hmph. Chaos Control . I'm impressed." Metal mused, as he chuckled. *"But using such a large amount of Chaos Energy , in the state they're in... is that really a smart move, for someone like her?"* Then, he turned away, and flew off. *"Calculate, we're going to Westopolis. Do not fall behind."*

Cal lingered a moment, staring back down at where the group was. *That didn't feel like a Chaos Emerald though…* He simply disregarded it though, as he went ahead after Metal.

Chapter 9

CHAPTER NINE– SHEDDING SOME LIGHT

"Well, they're certainly taking their time," Charmy said, pacing back and forth.

"Calm down Captain!" Rudy said, hopping up and down. "They're probably on their way back now!"

"Worrying isn't going to make them come back sooner, Charmy." Tails said with a sigh, as he enjoyed a cup of tea. "As Rudy said, they'll be back before you know it." Then, he closed his eyes. *But they have been gone for a longer time than anticipated... I just hope that they haven't gotten into too much trouble with the zone.* he thought.

Yeah, they'll be back in a time like…right now!

Out of nowhere, figures popped out in a strange flash of dark light, and they all fell to the floor of the porch with a thud.

"Ow…" groaned Boomer, as she sat up, rubbing her back. "A bit bumpy for a first time."

"YOU'RE BACK!" exclaimed Rudy, throwing his arms around Boomer. After Cal, he didn't want anything to happen to Boomer.

"Indeed they are!" Charmy said, brightening up. "So, how was it?"

"We built the most awesome snow fort ever, defeated an army of snow men, and we even kicked butt!" Ani laughed. "Oh yeah, and we almost got buried in snow…"

"Thanks to Ani though, we were okay!" Striker added. "She saved us! Not only that though, but Jill used Chaos Control!!!"

"Yar har har har har! 't be really somethin', let me tell ye!" Whisker laughed, as he placed his hands on his hips, just as he noticed the

hole in his body from where Metal had attacked him. "...ah... I might need some fixin' thar, Tails."

"I'll take care of it as soon as I can, Whisker." Tails said with a smile, though it faded when he noticed that Jack still seemed fairly solemn. "...what's the matter, Jack?" he asked.

When the older lion didn't answer, the littler lion did. "He tried to attack Cal with his harmonica and he missed…and it sorta caused the avalanche," Milo answered uneasily.

"Now Jack, don't take it so hard," Charmy said, setting a hand on Jack's shoulder. "Everyone makes mistakes."

"Brownie?!"

Everyone turned. Brick was startled seeing Jill hunched over and holding her hand, having dropped the black emerald on the ground, and Jill was crying. She opened up the hand that she was clutching, revealing severe burn marks on her hand; presumably the hand that was holding the emerald.

Tails, upon seeing that, suddenly dropped his cup of tea, before he ran to Jill's side, kneeling by her, and taking hold of her hand. "How did this happen to you?" he uttered, just as he noticed the black emerald. "...what in the...?"

"This be th' one we found up thar..." Whisker said, as he cautiously picked the black emerald up. "She acted a bit strange when she be about t' initiate th' Chaos Control, but... in all me life as a sea dog, this be th' first time I`ve ever..." he muttered, looking from Jill to the emerald.

"Th-that can wait! We need to get her inside, now!" Tails said, before he tried helping Jill on her feet. "Brick, do you think you could help me?"

"Of course!" Brick said, helping Tails take Jill inside.

"W-what's wrong with Jill?!" Milo asked.

Boomer also saw the burn marks on her hand. "That didn't look

right," she muttered, following the three of them inside.

Charmy wasn't sure of all the commotion, but he looked at the black emerald in Whisker's hand. "Now, I don't remember seeing a…black Chaos Emerald," he said.

"...actually, I think I reckon somethin' about this." Whisker mused, as he scratched his head. "Some o' th' files Eggman had on his computers, which Metal somehow gave me access t', told o' th' Chaos Emeralds losin' the'r positive energy, or negative, or somethin' along them lines..." Then, he sighed. "I dasn't know, but maybe that`s got somethin' t' do wi' 't. Ye think Tails can check this up later?"

"...what's wrong with Jill?" Jack asked, as he eventually got up, looking at the black emerald. "Did she get hurt... because of that?"

"Let's check on her," Milo said, running inside.

Brick and Tails brought Jill to a facet to run cold water on her hand. The minute the water touched her hand though, she gave out a cry of anguish.

"Brownie…" Brick didn't like seeing Jill like this one bit. Some of the kids peeked in from the crack in the kitchen door to check what was going on.

"Please, Jill, be strong..." Tails said in a reassuring tone, as he looked at her hand again. "...did you see anything?"

Jill bit her tongue to keep quieter, but the pain from the burns were excruciating. "My entire past flashed before my eyes," she whimpered. "That pain and suffering!" She looked like she was ready to sob uncontrollably. "It isn't a Chaos Emerald!"

"What?" Brick looked astonished.

"It isn't a..." Tails uttered, as he blinked . *...this is unnatural,* he thought, before shaking his head. "Listen, Jill... it might be hard to do this, but I want you to try to relax, and not think about what happened today. Do you think you could do that?"

Jill clenched her teeth with the pain of the burns seeping in, but she managed a nod. They turned off the facet to give Jill a break, and her hand retreated back. She shook severely, looking feeble.

Brick set his hands on her shoulders. "Come on. Maybe you should sit down and relax…" The kids scattered from the door when Brick took Jill out of the kitchen and down the hall.

"That black thing…it isn't a Chaos Emerald?" Striker said.

"Doesn't sound like it..." Jack said, as he sighed. "...this is because of me, isn't it?" he asked, looking at the group with a sad look. "I didn't mean it, but... because of me, Jill got really hurt..."

"No Jack," Striker said. "You didn't hurt Jill at all. That black thing did. Whatever that black thing is, it isn't good. It even made Jill cry…"

"Yeah Jack, we know you'd never, ever hurt Jill," Milo added.

"But..." Jack uttered, as he pressed his hand against his head. "But... she wouldn't have had to use that black thing if I hadn't tried making Cal pay for lying to us! We could have gotten back here without her being hurt, if I hadn't..."

"No," Ani said, growing serious. "If we should blame anyone for hurting Jill, it should be Cal!"

"Yeah!" the rest of them agreed.

Jack blinked, as he looked at the group. Then, he nodded. "...yeah." he eventually said, a small smile on his face. "Thanks, guys."

"We'll always be here for you Jack," Striker said. "All for one and one for all!" Then they all stuck their hands in a pile.

Smiling, Jack placed his hand on the pile as well. "Yeah! We're not gonna let some meanies split us up!"

"Right!" Ani said, just as the pile of hands bounced and split.

"Professor," Milo said suddenly, as the old fox came out from the

kitchen. "If it isn't a Chaos Emerald, then what is that black thing?"

"...I can't say right now." Tails said, as he let out a sigh. "It has the same properties as a Chaos Emerald, and yet... me and Boomer will look into it, while Whisker keeps it safe; frankly, I don't want anyone else to get in physical contact with it."

After having watched Jill in the kitchen, Boomer wondered. "Not a Chaos Emerald," she said, "and yet, despite having gotten hurt, she still used Chaos Control…." She was really just murmuring to herself, thinking aloud. She didn't know much about Jill, so this was a big mystery to her.

"Chao?" Just then, Buddy came by. While the group had gone to Ice Cap Zone, he stayed behind with Cream. "Chao?" Buddy asked, wondering what was wrong.

Boomer's thoughts were interrupted when Buddy approached her. "Oh, hi Buddy," she said. The purple speckled chao looked sad. "Jill got hurt," she explained to him. "We're trying to figure out why."

"Chao…" Buddy understood, but that didn't cheer him up. Boomer started to pet him.

"Don't worry little guy," she said comfortingly. "We'll figure it out. Jill's alright now." Boomer was rarely this calm and gentle. She was usually kind of sour and serious all the time, but even Boomer had a soft side that surfaced every now and then. She took Buddy in her arms then and continued to pet the Chao while she was consumed with thinking.

Brick brought Jill somewhere in the HQ away from the others, knowing she might needed to be isolated. In her emotional state, that was understood. She was still crying as Brick walked her through the hall. "Does it really hurt that bad?" He asked her.

Jill shook her head, "No, that's not what I'm crying about." And she wiped her eyes. Brick found a loveseat and sat her down on it, and then he sat down with her with a hand on her back. "Everything I

didn't want to remember…I was forced to see it all again when I did that Chaos Control," she uttered.

"Like the Professor said, try not to think about it," he said, rubbing her back.

"How can I not think about it?!" she snapped suddenly, startling Brick. "It's not bad enough that I had to see all of it, but the most painful parts of it were pushed forward!"

"Brownie, you need to calm down!" Brick said, regrettably having to raise his voice.

"…I'm sorry," she muttered, wiping her eyes again.

Carefully, Brick reached over and took Jill's burnt hand, examining it. "That's not a good thing to leave without bandages," he said, getting up. "I'll be right back."

Once Brick left the room, Jill tried her best to take off the tattered glove on her burnt hand, wincing every minute of the time until she finally got the glove off. It looked even worse with it off; seeing the full extent of the damage. She looked away, because it was too hard for her to look at those burn marks. "I never wanted to feel this pain again…" she murmured, closing her eyes.

She wasn't heard, thankfully. After a little longer, Brick came around with a First Aid kit. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

"…a little better, I guess," Jill replied hesitantly.

"That's good," he sat, sitting back down beside her. "You even got the glove off." He took the burnt hand again, looking over it again since she took the glove off. His brows arched, and he looked at her with concern. "How much does it hurt?"

"Not too much that I can't cope with it," Jill said. Her emotional state seemed to be calming now, which relieved Brick to see. He went ahead with the bandaging process, and Jill watched him. She noticed how gentle he was with her hand, and she was able to stop thinking about what happened, only while thinking of something else. She started to think about all the times that Brick had to take

care of her; from when he saved her to now. The more she thought about it, the more she was figuring it out.

" *No need to thank me; I was happy to help."*

That's what he always said when she tried to thank him for all that he did.

Brick didn't know she was looking at him, as he obliviously worked on her hands.

Jill didn't know why she didn't see it before, though why it was now was the time that she saw it couldn't be explained. He made an effort to make sure she was taken care of, to be there for her, and the most obvious factor of it all was when he punched Cal when she told him that the monkey had kissed her. *Is it…really true?* She thought. She was beginning to see him in a whole new light…

"Brownie?" Brick said, finally noticing her looking at him.

Jill jumped, and looked away hurriedly, blushing. "Uh…"

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asked her, raising an eye brow. It was apparent that he didn't notice what was with Jill.

"Yeah, I'm okay," she said, trying not to look at him. "I'm starting to feel even better."

Brick smiled, "that's good." He had finished bandaging her hand up, and it looked much better than having to stare at the burn marks. He shut the First Aid kit up and then he got up to put it away, leaving the room. Jill watched as he walked away, standing up herself.

Why didn't I see it before? She thought, closing her eyes. Then she opened them. *Wait a minute, how did I end up thinking about this?* Jill looked at her bandaged hand. Not too long ago, she was crying over the horrible things she had to see again, and now suddenly she was thinking of love. *Maybe it was because I was alone for so long* , she thought, closing her eyes again. *I was still under the delusion that I had to rely on myself all this time…especially when my powers came back, I still thought that.*

But realizing that she really wasn't alone anymore, it changed her. It took her this long to finally see that she wasn't alone anymore; despite how many times her friends told her this. She finally smiled, as she held her bandaged hand.

"There's that smile," Brick said, coming back into the room. "Looks like you feel much better."

"Yeah, I do," she said, and when she looked at him, her smile grew wider.

So did his. "You ready to join the others now?" he asked her.

Jill nodded. "Yeah, the younger ones need to know I'm okay. I hope I didn't scare them with all that…"

"They'll be okay," Brick said, as he started walking the way that presumably everyone else was, with Jill accompanying closely. "I'm just glad that you're alright."

"…thank you Brick," she said.

Brick looked at Jill. She said thanks a lot, and he usually told her she didn't have to, but this particular thank you caught his attention; he wasn't sure why. He only smiled at her. "I was happy to help," he said, repeating what he always said.

"Purity hm?" Boomer muttered. Tails had just got done explaining to Boomer most of the information on Jill that he knew; at least enough to fill in the blanks for her. "That black emerald must still have Chaos energy if she was able to pull of Chaos Control then. What I'm wondering is why it burned her when she used it."

"Hey Professor," Striker said. "Remember the story about when you first met Shadow, and that space port in outer space was turned back on for the first time in a long time?"

"You mean, the Space Colony ARK?" Boomer asked.

"Yeah, that's it!" Striker said. "And you said in order to stop it from

destroying Mobius; you made a fake emerald to put into the cannon to break it."

"Striker, are you saying that black thing could be a fake emerald someone could've made?" Milo asked.

Striker nodded, "M-hm."

"That... is actually a very plausible theory." Tails mused, as he folded his arms. "Even with a fake Chaos Emerald, Sonic was able to initiate Chaos Control to save his life. However, something just doesn't add up..."

"Like what?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head.

"...when Sonic used the fake Emerald, it didn't give him any injuries or anything of the sort." Tails replied. "So how could it have..." Then, his eyes widened. "...don't tell me..."

"Tell ye what?" Whisker asked, as he looked at Tails. "Did ye figure somethin' ou'?"

"...I have a theory, though whether or not it's true is disputable." Tails replied, before he closed his eyes. "In any case, we should try disposing of that gemstone; frankly, I don't feel that Jill would be safe as long as we keep it around."

"Really?" Ani asked.

"But what if Metal gets his hands on it?" Boomer said. "If he figures out that he can use that emerald against Jill…"

"Which is why I want it disposed of." Tails said, as he opened his eyes. "I don't know who created it, but if Metal or Calculate gets a hold of the stone... in any case, it must be destroyed."

"Can that really be done safely?" Whisker inquired, as he folded his arms. "I mean, 'tis a fake, but thar`s still Chaos Energy within that thin'! Crushin' 't would lead t' nothin' but trouble fer th' one who did destroy 't."

"And what if whatever was inside of it that made Jill feel pain was

really bad, and it'd take over the closest person to it when it was destroyed?" Jack shot in, as he rubbed his chin.

"...true." Tails conceded, before sighing. *There's no telling what could happen if an item containing so much power was destroyed, and I would hate for anyone to have to claim that responsibility...* he thought, cursing himself for not realizing that earlier.

"We can't destroy it."

Everyone spun around to see Jill walking forward, with Brick behind her.

"Jill!" Jack called, as he looked at her bandaged hand. "You're feeling better?"

Whisker blinked, as he looked at Jill. "How come we canna destroy 't, lass?" he asked.

"Because that emerald is even more dangerous than you know," Jill said. "When I used Chaos Control with that emerald, it brought memories rushing back to me. Somehow, this cleared up the memories that were blurred up, and I now know of the whereabouts of Deity Novagod, the vampire I faced long ago."

Shocked looks filled the room, directed at Jill.

"…Wh-where is he?" Milo asked fearfully.

And that made Jill point at the emerald. "He's locked away…in *that* ," she said.

Hearing that, Jack initially scooted away from the emerald, looking at it in shock.

"...I feared that it was something like that." Tails sighed, as he looked at the gemstone. *That's his prison, now...*

"...Deity Novagod?" Whisker uttered, as he tilted his head. "I dasn't think I`ve been informed about this bloke, me swabbies."

"Well, Jill fought this vampire guy a long time ago," Striker started to

explain. "He was really tough, and scary, and he made Jill cry in her sleep. He did a lot of bad things to her and the people around her, and she was all alone. Then she had a big battle with him, and she told us that she couldn't remember the rest of what happened, but after that battle, she had lost her powers."

"Basically that's that in a nutshell," Boomer remarked.

"But now I remember the rest of it," Jill said. "Just as he thought he had me, I sealed him away in that. I guess it cost me my powers; back then, I didn't understand them very well, so I was pretty reckless. I never saw it again…up until now."

"...so if we destroy that thin'..." Whisker mused, as he looked at the black gemstone. "...then th' vampire be released?"

"I would believe so." Tails said, as he looked at the gemstone as well.

Hearing that, Whisker hummed. "...then 'tis pretty obvious what we be havin' t' do." he said, before he grabbed the emerald. "We seal this thin' someplace nay one can ere get 't."

"Seal it away?" Jack repeated, as he looked at Whisker.

"We have to," Jill said. "I don't know where we can place it where no one will be able to find it, but there's no telling what will happen if Deity is released." Then Jill looked grave. "But this doesn't explain why my powers have returned. If Deity had already broken free, that would be understood, but…"

Brick added his own thought, "it's as if he hasn't been freed yet."

"Wait, are you saying that your powers came back as if foreshadowing that this vampire would be freed?" Boomer asked in disbelief.

"So... it's like fortune telling?" Jack asked, as he scratched his head.

"Or a sign o' fate, perhaps?" Whisker chimed in. "But if 'tis been fated that he be t' escape... how in blazes will that happen?"

"I don't think we should think of how he can escape; rather, we need to find out where to hide it, so that Metal can't attempt to do something that Eggman would be likely to do." Tails said.

"Part of me thinks that Metal wouldn't be that stupid," chuckled Jill. "Can you imagine Metal catching the 'unlocking ancient beast' syndrome, like you described Eggman to have, Professor?"

"Anyhow, what's a place that Metal can't get to?" asked Brick. "I think we should start with something like that."

All of a sudden, Boomer perked up. "GUN," she said.

Whisker blinked. "How be firearms gonna stop Metal from gettin' his hands on th' gem?" he asked.

"No, she means GUN!" Jack said. "It's the group that Uncle Shadow worked with! Maybe they could hide it someplace safe!"

"...I hadn't even considered that." Tails uttered, before he looked at Boomer with a smile. "Quick thinking as always, Boomer."

Boomer smirked.

"It might also be a good opportunity to tell them what's going on," Brick added. "I don't know how much they know about the situation, but it might be comforting for them to know that there's actually someone capable of fighting against Metal; especially after that televised message he sent to the entire nation."

Jill looked uneasy, "I don't know about that…"

"What do you mean?" Brick asked.

Jill looked away. "I don't want to be known as some big hero like Sonic…not really, I mean…" she trailed off. She didn't really know how to put it in words, but she didn't want to be a celebrity, as much as being a hero. She's not the most social butterfly in the group after all.

"...I understand." Tails said, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. "I've been in this position as well. When we deliver the news to

GUN, we'll make sure that you remain anonymous, until you feel that you're ready."

Jill smiled up at Tails. "Thank you," she said, feeling more comfortable.

"There's also the fact your hand is burned," Boomer said, talking to Jill. "You won't be shooting a bow anytime soon, that's for sure, and if you can't fight, then we'll have a hard time fighting Metal and Cal. With GUN behind us—"

"Wait a minute," Ani said, snapping her fingers. "Jill, why don't you just heal that burn?"

"…I can't," Jill said, turning away shamefully. "I've never been able to heal any damage done by Deity. He possesses energy which can oppose Purity…not to mention cause me just about the most excruciating pain possible."

"So it'll have to heal the old fashioned way," supposed Brick, with Jill nodding in reply.

"What are we standing around here for?" Boomer asked. "If we want to get going, we'd better. Every second we waste is a second given to Metal to collect those emeralds."

"Aye, ma'am!" Whisker said, as he placed the gem on the table, before placing his fists against his hips. "Now, let`s get movin', ye landlubbers! We`ve got Chaos Emeralds t' collect! Yar har har har har!"

"Yeah, let's do it!" Jack cheered.

In Westopolis, in what had used to be the Mayor's residence, a certain robotic hedgehog was searching through computer files. *...no...* he thought, as he rubbed the side of his head. *It does not add up... eight signals, including the one I possess... that black emerald must be an anomaly. But what caused it?*

Cal just leaned against the wall, watching him. He was wondering if

he should tell Metal what he had sensed when they felt that Chaos Control at the Ice Cap Zone, but for some reason, it was just so darn entertaining watching Metal like this.

After a while, Metal groaned, before he closed his eyes. *"This is strange... not a single one of the files I have says anything about this sort of phenomenon. Not Eggman's files, not GUN's files, not anyone's files."* he sighed. *"I'll have to leave it for later, it seems; right now, I should find some countermeasure against Jillian's Purity, so she cannot cancel out a Super transformation..."*

Cal decided to leave it alone for now. "But even after studying her DNA, you haven't found any solutions yet," he said. "How do you expect to find the answer?"

"Through patience, trial and error, Calculate, unless a different path reveals itself." Metal said bluntly, before he closed his eyes. *"...but before I try to find a way to stop her from meddling when I have all the emeralds, I should find some way to halt their search altogether."* Then, he began typing on the computer again. *"And I think I have an idea... you familiar with androids, Calculate?"*

"Somewhat," Cal replied dully. "What's your plan?"

"Oh, nothing in particular..." Metal mused, just as he stopped typing. *"First we send a prototype in there, to see what can be done. Then, we send an army... and I think they would be glad to see a familiar face."* Then, he enlarged one image, before showing it to Cal.

Cal chuckled when he saw it. "Not bad," he said.

"I thought that you would like it." Metal chuckled, before he returned to typing. *"The prototype will land close to them within the next 24 hours. I want you to monitor it, along with its actions, and report anything unusual to me. But do not make yourself known to them; keep in mind, this is a test."*

"Roger," Cal responded with a nod. "With the cloaking device you installed in me, it shouldn't be that difficult."

"Indeed." Metal said, before he pressed one last button, initiating a

countdown on the monitor. *"There; the prototype is on its way. Now, Calculate, you know your mission."*

Cal closed his eyes. Then he disappeared completely out of thin air, but only visibly. In reality, he had activated his cloaking, and without a sound, he left the room.

As they were walking up to the entrance of the military base, Jill couldn't help but feel even more nervous. She wasn't comfortable around military. It seemed harsh, and cold; in some ways, it just reminded her of the things in her past she wanted to forget. Brick occasionally would comfort her, but she wasn't going to be totally relaxed.

When they approached the entrance, however, two soldiers blocked the way, looking at the group before them; as Whisker had opted to stay behind with Cream, Charmy and the kids, the group consisted of Tails, Jill, Brick, Jack and Boomer. Then, without a sound, they moved aside, just as the doors opened. "You've been expected, Prower. The Commander is waiting for you."

Boomer tried to hide how eager she was. After all, one of her dreams was to work for GUN, preferably as a weapon's technician just as she did for the Chaotix. It seemed like her place anyway, and Rudy would agree, considering he knew her volcanic temper.

As they entered through the front gate, Brick looked over at Jill. "How're you doing?"

"I'm alright, I guess," she muttered.

As the group walked through the building, eventually, their path was blocked by a different group; namely, three Mobians. One of them was a muscle-bound salamander, another of them was a female bullfrog, and the third one was a snake, who silently glared at the group.

"Um... is there something wrong?" Jack asked, as the snake slowly closed his eyes.

"Outsiders." the bullfrog scoffed, as she placed one hand on her hip.

"That's what you are, y'know!" the salamander said brashly, as he flexed his arms, looking at the group.

"Us? Outsiders?" Boomer questioned irritatingly.

Brick also looked pretty mad. "You have no right to call us that," he said.

"Sure we do, y'know!" the salamander retorted, as he butted his fists against each other. "You guys aren't part of GUN, so that means that you're outsiders, y'know?"

"Obvious." the bullfrog chimed in, as she glanced at Boomer.

"So, either you guys are gonna tell us what you're doing here, y'know, or we're gonna throw your—"

"Can it, Newt." the snake suddenly said, as he glared at the salamander, which actually made him stop his flexing out of sheer fear. "Same to you, Natal." he added, throwing a glance at the bullfrog, which made her look away from Boomer.

Tails blinked, stunned at the authority this snake seemed to have. "...and you are?" he asked, just as the snake suddenly grabbed Tails hand, shaking it.

"The pleasure is mine, Miles Prower." the snake said. "The name's Wiper."

"Wiper huh?" Brick said. "Glad that the two of them actually listen to someone. My name's Brick."

"Boomer," the duck replied bluntly.

"I'm Jill," introduced the ewe.

"And I'm Jack!" Jack said with a smile, just as Wiper let go of Tails' hand.

"I see..." Wiper mused, as he briefly glanced at Boomer. "You're part

of the Chaotix, aren't you?" he said, just as he stuck his tongue out briefly, making a hissing sound while it was out of his mouth. "I've heard good things about you. Ever considered becoming part of GUN?"

"Not to be rude, Wiper, but we're on our way to meet the Commander." Tails said, as he gave the snake a smile. "So would you mind telling your friends to move aside?"

"I have a better idea." Wiper replied, before he turned around. "Newt, Natal, we're taking these people to the Commander. Any objections?" Silence. "I thought so. Let's go." Then, the three began walking down the hall, whilst Wiper looked back at the group to ensure that they followed

the three.

Boomer couldn't believe that Wiper actually asked if she would consider joining GUN. She couldn't stop grinning as she and the rest of the group followed the trio, though the part where Wiper stuck his tongue out was a bit creepy to her.

Brick was impressed with Wiper. He was also glad that those two mouths were shut, and though Brick was likely to say something without thinking as well, he decided to keep quiet himself, that is, until he turned to Jill and noticed she was looking at him. "Something wrong?"

Jill turned away hurriedly again. "Uh…nothing's wrong; just thinking."

Chapter 10

CHAPTER TEN

Eventually, they stopped by a large door, with the GUN logo proudly adorned above it. Wasting no time, Wiper opened the door. "Commander, you've got visitors." he said, as he, Newt and Natal entered the room, before the others followed them.

As they entered the room, they'd see a large chair facing away from the door, along with cigarette smoke flowing up from the other side of it. "...thank you, Agent Wiper." a female voice said, just as the chair turned around, letting the group see the GUN Commander; it was a blonde woman, with her already short hair tied in a small ponytail, and if not for the heavily-decorated uniform, one could have mistaken her for a civilian. "I don't believe that we've met before, Miles Prower. Shadow told me a lot about you." she said, as she placed a lit cigarette between her lips, inhaling its contents.

Smelling the nicotine, Jill turned away. She didn't want to plug her nose, since it would be rude, but the putrid smell of the smoke was too much for her.

"Ma'am," Brick suddenly said. "About Shadow…have you…" he couldn't ask. He was going to ask if they actually properly buried him, but it was more likely he was in an autopsy rather than a grave.

"We're keeping his body cryogenically preserved." the Commander replied, as she extinguished the cigarette in a nearby ash tray. "Though I can assure you that we're not doing it for research purposes; many working in GUN would be enraged, if not outright violent, if a legend like him was left to just decompose after his death." Then, she looked at Tails. "Now, may I ask what was so important that you needed an audience with me, Prower?"

With a nod, Tails approached the desk, before fishing something out. "I wish to request that this is sealed." Then, he placed the pitch-black Chaos Emerald on the desk.

Whilst Newt and Natal eyed the gem with awe, the commander raised an eyebrow upon seeing it. "...a drained Chaos Emerald?" she mused.

"Allow me." Wiper said, as he approached the gem, placing a hand on it, and closing his eyes. "...no, this isn't drained. There's Chaos Energy in this thing." he said, before hissing in the same fashion as earlier.

"Hmph... I've never heard of a black Chaos Emerald before." the commander scoffed, before she looked at Tails. "And this is?"

Jill stepped forward, despite the cigarette smoke. "That holds a dangerous and evil power," she said. "And we ask that it be sealed away, because if Metal Sonic found out about it, he would try to use its power."

"Metal Sonic..." the commander said with a nod, before she looked at Jill, which would allow the ewe to see that the commander's eyes were differently colored from each other; the left one being green, and the right one being brown. "And how do you know of this power?"

"I've had a long and dark past with this power," she said, looking at her bandaged hand. Then she began to take off the bandages. "When I tried to use it, it did this to me." Then she showed the Commander the burns on her hand. Brick had to look away from that, remembering how she cried when they were taking care of it.

The commander hummed, as she looked at Jill's burnt hand. "It did that..." she said, before she stood up, placing her hands behind her back. "Injuries aside, simply saying that something contains a dark power, without explaining it, won't win you many cases. You're going to have to elaborate a bit more, if you want me to take you seriously." she said in a stern, yet fair tone.

"Yeah, you've gotta explain more, y'know!" Newt said, as he folded his arms, grinning.

"Do elaborate." Natal chimed in, as she grinned as well, though looks from both Wiper and the Commander made their grins wane

off.

Jill understood, and with a sigh, she put her bandages back on, ignoring Natal and Newt. "Alright," she said. "This dark power is a being with abilities beyond anyone's understanding; including mine. No one knows of him because he had worked in secrecy, and he wouldn't even be in your records if you looked, but he is a vampire that goes by the name of Deity Novagod. I sealed him away in that gem long ago to contain his dark powers, and…I have a fear that he might be released from that prison."

Raising an eyebrow, Wiper hissed once more. "A vampire?" he mused, as he looked towards the gem. "...so it's a prison."

"And you want GUN to keep it locked away, so Metal Sonic can't attempt to harness this vampire's powers." the commander said, as she sat down, looking at the gem as well.

"That's right." Tails said, as he closed his eyes.

"Hmph... without any guarantee as to when it could be freed..." the commander mused, before she took a cigarette out from a pocket on her jacket. "...it sounds farfetched, but many things in this world are. We'll have it sealed off in no time."

"Thank you," Jill said, even though there was some doubt to her.

"Commander," Boomer said. "I'm curious; have you figured out any way of fighting Metal Sonic?" She was moving onto the next thing they needed to tell them.

"We're still looking into that." the commander replied, just as she lit the cigarette, inhaling its contents once more. "Since he returned just recently, we haven't developed any true countermeasures, and with Shadow's death, our progress has halted somewhat."

"But we can still take that bucket of scrap on, y'know!" Newt shot in, as he puffed his chest out whilst slamming his fist into it. "He's got no chance when Team Alpha's in the house, y'know!"

"Instant annihilation." Natal nodded, as she folded her arms, though as Wiper glared at the two of them, their enthusiasm quickly died

out.

"I'm afraid it's not going to be that easy..." the commander sighed, before she nodded her head at the three agents. "In any case, after Shadow died, these three, commonly referred to as Team Alpha, became GUN's best when it comes to field operations; Newt the Salamander, heavy weapons expert, Natal the Bullfrog, tactical espionage expert, and the team leader, Wiper the Cobra." As she said their names, Newt and Natal folded their arms and nodded with satisfactory smiles, whilst Wiper simply nodded.

Boomer rubbed her bill as a smile came. "Tell me, have you guys actually *faced* Metal Sonic yet?"

"Yeah," Brick said, grinning as well.

"No, they haven't." Wiper said, as he shot both Newt and Natal a glare, as both of them lost their confident smirk. "And neither have I, for that matter. You'll have to excuse my teammates; they can get a little too impulsive at times." Then, he hissed. "Was there a reason behind your first question about Metal?" he asked, throwing Boomer a casual glance.

"Well, we have news that someone can stand up to Metal now," Boomer said, and then she directed a glance at Jill.

Jill hesitated, but she spoke. "Ma'am," she said. "The night that Shadow was killed, Metal Sonic acquired all seven emeralds and achieved a Super form. However, someone was able to stop him and scatter the emeralds again."

The commander raised an eyebrow, as she looked at Jill. "Really? And who would this person be?"

"He chose not to reveal his identity." Tails quickly shot in, as he looked at the commander. "Even I haven't seen that person before... he's an enigma, one could say."

"Someone who doesn't wish for any publicity, no doubt," Wiper said, as he hissed. "But anyone who can keep up with a machine like that must be quite powerful... I'd like to test myself against him, if I ever

get the chance." Then, he smirked just a bit, revealing some fangs in his mouth.

"Ooh, Wiper's pretty scary when he's grinning like that, y'know!" Newt uttered, as he moved a bit away from Wiper.

"Terrifying." Natal said with a nod, backing cautiously away as well.

Boomer eyed Wiper cautiously, as she also stepped away from the snake with a shudder. Brick didn't like that look in Wiper's eyes, as he looked at him sternly. Jill didn't even move at all, as she blinked at the snake. She had seen scarier things, so she wasn't fazed by it.

"Be careful what you wish for Wiper," she said. "You never know what you'll get."

Hissing, Wiper looked back at Jill, the smirk fading away. "Honestly, I wouldn't mind if it would be the death of me," he said, before folding his arms. "As long as I know that my opponent is strong enough to fend off any tyrant that ought to be good enough for anyone."

"Yeah, you tell her! Nobody's as cool as Wiper when it comes to stuff like this, y'know!" Newt cheered, as Natal simply rolled her eyes at her partner's behavior.

"In any case..." the commander said as she cleared her throat. "...if there's someone who's capable of fighting Metal Sonic, the people should be notified. That should make things a bit calmer... but then, I begin to wonder about the safety of you people." she said, just as she glanced at Jill for a brief moment.

"We're alright," Brick said. "All of us have experience fending for ourselves. Heck, I was raised on a farm; I should know the meaning of self-reliance."

"Regardless," the commander said, just as she took another drag from her cigarette, "Metal Sonic is a shrewd fighter, if my great-grandfather's journals are anything to go by. There's no telling what lows he would stoop to, just to have any of you killed."

"But we can fight for ourselves!" Jack protested. "We've got a pirate

robot back at our place, and almost everyone has something they can use to fight with!"

"I am sorry, but I will not be at ease unless you leave this building with bodyguards." the commander replied, as she closed her eyes. "...and I think that I know the perfect ones for the job. Agent Wiper!"

Quickly, Wiper spun around and saluted the commander. "Yes, ma'am?" he replied, just as the commander smirked.

"I have a new mission for Team Alpha... you are to accompany Miles Prower and his young friends for the following month." she said, something that surprised both Newt and Natal.

"Wait, we're gonna have to babysit these guys? Think about what that's gonna do to our cred, y'know!" Newt protested.

"Out of the question!" Natal added, though as they acted up, Wiper suddenly shot a poisonous glare at the two, promptly making them freeze on the spot.

"That was a mission order," Wiper said, as he looked back at the group. "Whether any of us are okay with that or not, it's now officially our duty to protect them. And what is the main policy of Team Alpha?"

Gulping, both Newt and Natal eventually uttered "Duty first!" which made Wiper nod.

"Exactly," he said, before he hissed.

"Well, this will be interesting," Brick said, looking back and forth between the three mobians.

"I'm glad that we've settled that." the commander said, as she took a drag from the cigarette, before exhaling a cloud of smoke. "You can leave now. I'll have the gem sealed off, so don't worry about that."

"Thank you." Tails said with a nod, before looking at Team Alpha. "Well, shall we?" he said, and with that, the group began leaving...

"Ah, wait a moment!" the commander said, as she looked at Wiper.

"I would like to discuss something in private with Agent Wiper, so the rest of you can go ahead without him for the time being."

Nodding, Wiper looked at Newt and Natal. "Why don't you guys show them our equipment? I think we'll have need for them during this mission."

Both the salamander and bullfrog nodded to this, as they motioned for the group to follow them out the door.

Boomer rolled her eyes, thinking, *what kind of equipment do they have to show that I haven't already seen, or even invented?* But nonetheless, she followed the two, as well as Brick. Jill stopped a moment, glancing back at the Commander and at Wiper. Then she looked at the black emerald on the desk.

"Please…guard that thing with your life," she said. "Unimaginable things can happen if that power is released…"

"Don't worry; we'll handle it," the commander said with a smile. "Now, hurry along now; this is a private conversation, so no eavesdropping, or we'll have you prosecuted." Of course, this last part was meant as a joke, even as she said it with that same smile on her face.

Jill cracked a half-smile; she got the joke, but she was still concerned about that dark emerald. She left out the door anyway, holding her bandaged hand with Brick waiting for her.

"Don't worry Brownie," he said. "That thing is in good hands…"

"He's going to come for it anyway," she murmured.

Brick looked at her.

"Metal can track down the emeralds like a blood hound," she said. "Not only that, but I can already tell that GUN has possession of one of the Chaos Emeralds. He's going to come sooner or later…" She said it quietly enough that no one else heard her, and they were too far back from the group.

Brick became concerned. Even if he didn't want Jill to worry about it,

he knew she was right. He just wasn't sure if Jill was going to freak out, or not. Nowadays, Jill had been pretty unpredictable. "GUN will do their best Brownie," he said.

"Yeah, but it's not going to be enough," she said.

Brick was left without any other words to say to her. It was hopeless to try and cheer her up; she was much too practical and realistic. But then, Jill looked up at him. She saw how discouraged he looked, and she realized what was wrong.

"I'm sorry Brick," she said, setting a hand on his shoulder; which happened to be the bandaged one. "I get caught up thinking that way; it's how I survived." Then she winced from the burns, as she retreat her hand off his shoulder.

"Hey! You two hurry up, or you're gonna get lost, y'know!" they would hear Newt call after them, briefly followed by Natal uttering "Slowpokes."

Brick took Jill's bandaged hand gently, and led her down the hall. "You don't have to try and survive anymore Brownie," he said. "I'm here for you."

When Jill closed the door, the commander slouched back in her chair. "...we're freezing that gem." she said, looking at the black gem.

"The cryolab? Isn't that where we keep Shadow's body?" Wiper uttered, as he hissed lowly. "I don't want to have it in the same place as a legend of his stature..."

"Because he was such a legend, is why we're placing it with him." The commander said, as she took a drag from her cigarette. "That is the place with the highest security, and in case of a breach, the whole laboratory would be locked down, with locks not even a Super could break through, and passwords only I know of. The cryolab is the safest place it can be kept."

"...was there anything else you wanted to speak with me about?"

Wiper uttered, as he raised an eyebrow.

"Actually..." the commander said, as she closed her eyes, "...it's about the ewe."

Wiper raised an eyebrow. "What about her?" he asked, as he folded his arms.

"I can't put my finger on it... but she seems to be withholding information from us. I am curious as to how she sealed the vampire..." With a sigh, she looked at Wiper. "I want you to keep an eye on her, report on anything unnatural regarding her, and ensure that she isn't, under any circumstances, critically injured. That is a mission priority."

Wiper blinked, before he hissed. "Understood, ma'am." he said with a nod.

"That's what I wanted to hear." the commander said, as she nodded. "You're dismissed."

Without a word, Wiper walked towards the door, exiting the room, and leaving the commander with the black gem.

After a while, the group wound up by three doors; one of them with a snake on it, one with a dragon on it, and the other with a frog on it. "These are our quarters, y'know! This is where we keep our equipment, y'know!" Newt said enthusiastically, as he opened the door with the dragon, while Natal opened the door with the frog on it. "But don't enter Wiper's room; not until he catches up, y'know!" Then, they entered their respective rooms.

Boomer looked at Jill. "Didn't think you'd wipe that smile off his face," she said. "Earlier when Wiper said he wanted to face…" Boomer paused, remembering Newt and Natal, "…the *anonymous hero* if he got the chance."

Jill took a deep breath. "I just hope they'll be prepared for things to come."

"Yeah, I can share that worry," Brick murmured in opinion. "They look like rookies fresh from an academy, or just plain amateurs judging by their manners."

Boomer turned and went into Newt's room, leaning on the side of the doorway with folded arms. "So, word is you're a heavy weapon's expert," she said. "What kind of things do you deal with, big guy?"

Newt didn't answer Boomer, as he walked up to a large locker, which seemed to take up roughly one fifth of the entire room. With a smirk, he looked back at Boomer. "Stuff like this, y'know!" Then, he opened the locker, allowing Boomer to see just what was in that locker; a large Stinger missile launcher, a jetpack which was somehow combined with a flamethrower, and most surprising, a M61 Vulcan gatling gun, with an ammo belt that stuck out of a canister which took up roughly a third of the locker's room on its own. "Heavy weaponry!"

Boomer chuckled, having to admit that this stuff was pretty sweet, even if she had seen it before. "Nice," she said. "If you're planning to take all this junk with you, need any help with it?" She figured she'd be nice.

Newt laughed, as he grabbed the large canister with one hand. "Sure thing, if you can lift any of them!" Then, he hoisted it and the Vulcan out of the locker, hanging the canister on his back by some straps, whilst holding the Gatling with one hand. "Because they're a bit heavy, y'know!"

"Heavy? Psch!" Boomer immediately hoisted up the rest of the equipment with ease. "Believe me big guy; I'm stronger than I look."

Newt couldn't help but whistle as Boomer so easily lifted the remaining equipment.

Meanwhile, Jack entered Natal's room, though the first thing he noticed was that it was really dark in the room. "You were some tactical spy, or something?" he asked, as he could barely make out an outline of Natal further into the room. "What sort of stuff do you use?"

Without a word, Natal lit a set of candles, which illuminated the room enough for Jack to see an extremely long, sheathed Nodachi hanging from her wall, which she took down from the wall with one hand. "This." She said, before hanging the sheathed weapon on her back.

"Hey Brownie, before we met with the Commander, you said you were thinking," Brick said, looking at Jill curiously. "What about?"

Jill was quiet for a minute, looking at Brick with small eyes. "Uh…" She looked away shyly while shifting her feet. "I was just thinking back."

"Yeah?" Brick asked, a little curious about her behavior. "On what?"

"Oh, you know…" Jill couldn't stop herself from blushing while scratching her nose. What was she thinking about exactly? Well she was looking at Brick, wondering about whether or not what she discovered about Brick was true, and if so…whether or not she liked him back, "…particular things."

"Particular things?" Brick inquired, chuckling with amusement. "Like, what sort of things?"

"Uh…I'll tell you later," Jill said, scratching her head as she continued to blush.

"Why not now?" Brick asked, with a joking grin.

Jill turned to Tails, pointing at Brick. "Professooooooor, Make him stop teasing me!" she whined, jokingly of course.

Tails chuckled, as he shook his finger at Brick. "You heard her; stop teasing her, Brick." he said just as jokingly, as Jack and Natal emerged from Natal's room, Natal carrying her Nodachi.

At that moment, Wiper caught up with the group, giving them a nod. "I suppose you've seen Newt and Natal's equipment?" he asked.

"Sure have," Boomer replied to Wiper as she came out with Newt, carrying the equipment. "The big guy sure knows his weaponry, that's for sure."

"Well, it's a hobby of his, you could say." Wiper shrugged, before he opened the door with the snake on it. "By all means, come in if you want." he said, before entering the room.

Jill managed to stop blushing from Brick, and curiously followed Wiper into his room. Brick joined, though to keep an eye on Jill since he wasn't sure about Wiper; that and after Cal, he wanted to make sure no one else wanted to put the moves on her.

Compared to Newt's and Natal's rooms, Wiper's room was relatively tame. The most noteworthy thing about it was a drawer, which Wiper approached and opened, only to pull out his equipment, which was nothing more than a shotgun and a case for its ammo shells. Again, compared to Newt and Natal, this seemed really tame. "There, all done." he said, as he hung the shotgun over his shoulders, taking the casing under his arm. "We're ready to go."

Brick raised a brow, "Not much to you, is there?"

"Hn?" Wiper looked at Brick with a blank expression. "Oh, this is just when I need more stopping power." he said with a hiss. "I work better without weapons." Then, he walked out of the room, giving Newt and Natal nods. "We're ready to leave."

"More stopping power?" Brick questioned.

"Well, yeah, if he can sense Chaos Energy, he might have abilities we've yet to see," Jill supposed, as she walked out into the hall.

Hearing Jill say that, Wiper let out another hiss, before him, Newt and Natal started walking down the hall, Wiper motioning for the group to follow him.

"I wonder what the others are gonna do when they see these guys..." Jack mused, as the group began following the three agents.

"Alright ye wee scallywags, come ou'; I be going to find ye!" Back at the HQ, Whisker was walking through the halls, searching for the kids in a game of hide-and-seek. "You canna hide from Captain Whisker, ye know!"

Ani was hiding underneath the kitchen sink cabinet, trying to suppress her snickering. It wasn't hard for her to hear Whiskers; she had quite an acute sense of hearing. But there was a reason she was snickering, for above the doorway into the kitchen there was a bucket of water set to spill on whoever opened that door. Hopefully, Whisker wouldn't malfunction with just a little water; after all, he was a pirate captain and he was around a lot of water.

Eventually, Whisker stood by the door into the kitchen, as he slowly opened it, entering the room. "Peekaboo, I be seein'-" he said, just as the bucket of water fell down on him, soaking him and leaving the bucket stuck on his head. "...YAR HAR HAR HAR HAR! Who ere planted that thar got me good!" he laughed, before blindly stepping forward.

Ani finally couldn't help it. Knowing her trap got Whisker, she burst out laughing uncontrollably, which would likely give away her hiding spot.

"What? Who's thar?" Despite hearing Ani's laughter, with the bucket over his head, and without thinking that he could simply remove it, he 'looked' blindly around him. "I know that ye`re thar, so jus' come ou', wher ere you be!"

Ani fell out of the cabinet, and realizing that Whisker couldn't see, she snuck past Whisker until—

"Hey, you can't do that Ani!" blurted Striker, popping out of another cabinet door. "That's cheating!"

"Cheatin'? Who`s cheatin'?" Whisker said, as he continued looking blindly around him. "If I catch ere cheatin', I be going to punish them... wi' TICKLING!"

Ani laughed again with a maniacal tone, "You'll never catch me ALIVE!!!" And just as she was going to run out the kitchen, someone ran into her and the two of them tumbled onto the floor.

"They're back! They're back!" exclaimed Rudy, who was the one that ran into her.

"They are?!" Striker asked, crawling out of the cabinet he was in.

"Yeah! And they brought some really COOL friends with them!" Rudy said, just as Ani shoved him off. "There'—!"

"Good grief Rudy, breathe," Brick suddenly said, as he walked into the kitchen. Then he looked over at Whisker, raising an eye brow. "Whisker, why do you have a bucket on your head?" he asked.

"..." Whisker stood completely still when he heard that question. Then, in what could only be assumed to be nanoseconds, he removed the bucket, dropped it to the floor, and looked dumbfounded at Brick. "What bucket?"

"The bucket that was on your head!" Rudy said to Whisker.

"Ha-ha," Ani teased. "I got him with one of the oldest pranks in the book! Next time, I'm filling that bucket with pudding; or sauerkraut."

"I should've known it was Ani's doing," Brick mused. "Anyhow, come meet our guests; *Team Alpha.* " He snickered at that last bit, seeing as he didn't exactly take them seriously.

"Team Alpha?" Whisker mused, as he scratched his head. "What be they, a bunch o' pretty-boys, or somethin'?"

"WHO'S CALLING US PRETTY-BOYS, Y'KNOW?!" they could hear someone yell from outside.

Brick snickered even more. Just because Whiskers said that, he now had a great respect for the pirate robot. Anyhow, the three kids in the kitchen eagerly flooded into the living room, where everyone else was.

"Hi guys," Jill said, smiling at them. "How were you guys?"

"We played hide-and-seek, and Whisker was it!" Striker said.

"You played hide and seek? That sounds like fun!" Jack laughed.

Whisker blinked, as he looked at the three agents; Wiper, who seemed fairly disinterested, Natal, who was inspecting the sheath of

her sword, and Newt, who glared at the pirate robot. "Where`d ye find these guys? They look like guys from some kind o' video game!" he said, which seemed to tick Newt off.

"You tryin' to start something, y'know?!" he replied, just as he and Whisker butted heads, glaring intensely at each other.

"Newt, give it a rest." Wiper said which instantly made Newt back down. "Nice to meet you all. The name's Wiper." he said with a nod to the kids.

Natal, after placing her sword on her lap, eventually looked towards the kids, before giving them a friendly smile. "Hi." she said in a sweeter tone than the one she had carried back at GUN's headquarters. "I'm Natal."

"…hi, I'm Milo," said a small voice. Milo came into the room a bit shyly after seeing the new three here. "You didn't come find me, so after a long time, I came out to look for you guys…I was kinda scared."

Striker scratched his head sheepishly. "Sorry Milo, we forgot about you…"

"…chao?" Buddy was hiding behind Milo, looking between Newt and Wiper with fear since both of them looked intimidating.

"Whisker, any dangers to report since we were gone?" Boomer asked, setting down the stuff she was carrying, which made the kids' eyes widen with amazement how much she carried.

Since Newt had backed down, Whisker looked at her with a shrug. "Nope, nothin' interestin', ma'am." he said, as he threw a glance at Wiper, before looking back at Boomer. "What about ye guys? Did th' meetin' go well?"

"Yeah, they're going to seal up that black emerald," Jill said.

"But the Commander was worried about our safety," Brick said, and then jotted a thumb at Wiper, Newt and Natal. "So she assigned these guys as our bodyguards for the next month."

"Bodyguards?" Ani said, walking up to Newt with a big grin. "We don't need no bodyguards! I bet I could take this big guy on!"

Newt looked down at Ani with a smirk. "The kid's got spunk, y'know!" he laughed, as he rubbed Ani's head. "I like this one already!"

"You would." Natal remarked, as she couldn't help but giggle when she saw Newt grow an annoyed look on his face.

"In any case, you're stuck with us for an entire month." Wiper said, as he sat down on a chair. "Make the best of that time, I say."

Meanwhile, a very long distance from the HQ, something suddenly crash-landed on the ground; a black pod, similar to the one that had carried Whisker to the area. Soon, it opened, with lots of steam emitting from the opening, and a white glove grabbing hold of the entrance. "...Jillian..."

Hanging in a nearby tree, the invisible Cal had awaited this exact area that it was calculated to land. Now that it came, he stuck his head out of the brush, but he remained invisible.

The figure slowly stepped out of the pod, looking around, until it saw the HQ ahead of him. "...Jillian..." he uttered once more, before he began running towards the house, holding something in his hand...

"...how do ye carry around them things, anyway?" At this point, Whisker had begun questioning Newt about his equipment, after the salamander had placed his Gatling gun along with the other things Boomer had carried for him. "I'd be havin' a hard time imaginin' ere but Boomer liftin' things

like that, right, ma'am?" he asked, looking at Boomer.

Newt scoffed, as he folded his arms. "How else do you think I can carry them around? With lots and lots of training, y'know!"

Humming, Jack looked at the kids. "You guys wanna play hide-and-

seek again?" he asked, though this caught Natal's attention, as she looked at them with a surprised look.

"...can I join?" she asked.

They looked at her with some surprise as well, but then all the kids smiled. "Sure!" Striker said. "I bet you're a really good hide-and-seeker!"

"Thanks." Natal said with a smile, as she placed her Nodachi on the floor, before giving the kids a nod.

Boomer chuckled seeing how excited the kids got, and then she looked over at Whisker. "I worked in a lumber yard before the Chaotix," she said. "I did a lot of heavy lifting, so he's somewhat right about that."

"Really now?" Brick asked. "You never told us that."

"Yeah, well you never really told us you were raised on a farm," remarked Boomer.

At that moment, they heard a knocking on the door. "Huh... who could that be?" Whisker mused, as he moved to the door, before opening it, only to be met with absolutely nothing. "Nobody here... hn?" Looking down, Whisker noticed something lying on the doorstep, as he picked it up.

"What is it Whisker?" Jill asked, as she came to the door to see.

Nearby on a ledge, Cal sat, watching…

"...'tis fer ye." Whisker replied, as he handed Jill a small note, which read this: 'Jillian, come to the shore, alone.'

Jill tried to read over Whisker's shoulder, but since she was having trouble, she reached over and took the note to reread it. Cal spotted her bandaged hand with widened eyes. Metal had told him that Jill had the ability to heal… *so why is her hand wrapped in bandages?* He thought.

"Huh," Jill said. "I wonder who put it here."

Boomer came over and read it too, and laughed, "maybe you have a secret admirer!" and Brick growled promptly.

Jill shot her an annoyed look which clearly showed she wasn't amused. "Ha-ha," she groaned.

Cal closed his eyes in realization. *So, there IS something that can hurt you,* he thought. *And I may have a feeling what that 'something' is…*

"`tis tellin' ye t' go t' th' shore by yerself..." Whisker said, as he scratched his head. "Be ye sure that 'tis a good idee t' do that? 't could be a trap."

Wiper looked at Jill with a raised eyebrow, before hissing lowly to himself.

"Yeah, it could be," Jill said, looking over the note. "But this is something I don't want to leave unchecked...maybe if one other person came with me--!"

"I'll go," Brick said right away, standing up from where he sat.

"Brick...I meant someone lingering close by...in stealth," Jill said, turning to the bull.

"Brownie, I'm not letting you out of my sight," Brick said sternly.

"Brick, I need someone who can be silent and sneaky, and I'm sorry, but...you're not either of those," she said. Brick just looked at her in disbelief, and Jill felt so guilty knowing that saying something like that hurt his feelings. "If it IS a trap, then I need someone who can jump them..." Brick just turned away and started walking away. "Brick, I didn't mean--"

"No, go!" he said, leaving the room.

Newt blinked. "Huh. What was his deal?" he uttered, just as Natal smacked him across the head. "OW! Why'd you do that, y'know?"

"Inappropriate." was her reply, as she looked at Jill.

Seeing this scene, Wiper sighed, as he stood up. "I don't mean to intrude, but I'll accompany you." he said with a hiss.

"But... isn't Natal the spy?" Jack said, as he tilted his head. "So shouldn't she be the one to-"

"Wasn't she going to play with you?" Wiper replied, as he threw Natal a glance, when she only nodded. "Then I think it's settled.

Jill finally sighed in disdain, looking at Wiper. "Sure," she said. "It's yours and your parter's job to protect us anyway. It's just that..." she paused, going for the door, and then she stopped. "...I didn't mean it that way.

"I'm sure he'll be fine Jill," Boomer said. "Go on, and hurry back you two; or we're coming after you.

Jill nodded, and then she stepped out the door. Wiper hissed, before he threw another glance at Newt and Natal, who nodded at him. Then, he followed Jill out, though he made sure not to stay too close to her, so he would remain hidden from whoever wanted to see Jill.

And Cal waited until the two of them were far enough that they wouldn't hear the monkey tap into his communicator. "Metal," he said. "The android has set a trap for Jill, and she took the bait, but she is being cautious by letting someone else follow her in hiding. However...I believe I have made a beneficial discovery about dear Jill."

"Good work, Calculate... but I would rather that you keep an eye on the android before you tell me anything regarding Jillian. Call me if something else comes up."

Soon, Jill would approach the shore, where she would make out the outline of someone, standing partly in the water, facing away from her. Still tailing her was Wiper, who kept himself hidden from view, observing what was to happen.

It was about sunset now, so the setting sun in the horizon was a big factor concealing this figure as Jill shielded her eyes; but she saw the figure, nonetheless. "Are you the one that left the note?" she

asked, approaching the water.

The figure nodded, as it sighed. "...yes... it was me..." he said, and Jill would instantly recognize the voice. Then, the figure slowly turned around, showing his black-furred body, the red stripes on his quills, two rings on his wrists, and a pair of jet-shoes. "...Jillian."

Jill's heart would've stopped to see who it was, and she stood there silently, stunned beyond belief. It was like that for a moment, and then she finally spoke. "Shadow?!"

Chapter 11

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Indeed." the figure replied, as he began approaching Jill. "What's wrong, Jillian? You look like you've seen a ghost."

From his hiding spot, Wiper's eyes widened as he watched the figure's identity revealed. *How... how is that possible?* he thought, before he tried calming himself. *His body is still in the cryolab, to my knowledge... don't tell me...*

"No..." Jill stepped away from the figure that came to her in utter shock and disbelief. "I...I-I watched you die!" She didn't want to believe it at all, but she didn't know what else to think. She tried to wipe away the tears that were coming. "I wanted to save you...but you stopped me..."

Cal lingered somewhere else in hiding, being careful to be quiet as the invisible monkey watched.

"That was in the past." Shadow replied, as he gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm here now... so don't cry."

Jill began to tremble. Telling her not to cry is like telling a trapeze artist not to look down. "But...but I..." She just couldn't understand it. She swore that she saw him die; she felt the very life fade away from him.

Cal noticed where Wiper was, so as quickly and quietly as possible, he made his way towards the snake, knowing that Wiper would do something if he figured out what was up.

She tried to figure it out, as she looked at him, but she was too emotional to think straight. Jill continued to wipe her tears away to no avail, and then she buried her face in her hands.

Shadow tilted his head, as he gently took hold of Jill's chin, lifting her head up so she'd look at him. "Don't cry, Jillian." he repeated, as he

smiled a bit. "Everything's going to be alright; I promise." he said, when-

BOOM!

The sudden sound of a shotgun being fired made Shadow's smile go away, as he looked past Jill, only to see a shotgun barrel sticking out from behind a rock, pointed upwards. Then, Wiper emerged from his hiding spot, as he held the shotgun. "Enough of this charade." he said with a hiss, just as he pumped the gun, releasing the empty shell from the weapon.

"...didn't I specify that you should come alone, Jill?" Shadow said, as he looked curiously at Jill.

That managed to snap Jill into her senses, as she looked at Shadow in all seriousness. "Shadow the Hedgehog is dead," she said coldly. "My eyes didn't lie to me, and I know that he wouldn't lie to me either. You're not him..."

"Clever, aren't you?" Wiper would suddenly feel a blade held against his neck, and when Jill spun around, Cal appeared out of thin air, holding a katana to the cobra's neck. He glanced at him. "Hello Wiper," he said. "Fancy meeting you here..."

Wiper merely glanced at Cal from the corner of his eyes, before he hissed. "Calculate. I see you got an upgrade." he said in a neutral tone, as if he didn't even notice the blade. "Defected, have you? That doesn't surprise me."

Before Jill could stop Cal, however, Shadow suddenly grabbed her head, slowly crushing her within his grip, as she'd feel something akin to Chaos Energy seeping from his hand. "Shadow the Hedgehog is not dead, Jillian. He lives on... so don't cry. Everything's going to be fine..."

"Now I'm not going to cry," Jill growled, started to feel weaker and weaker. "It's all fun and games until you mess with my emotions, and now you've crossed the line!" In an instant, Shadow, or so to be thought as Shadow, would suddenly see his arm sliced off in less than a second...

...and Jill stood a distance away, with her holy blade in her hand; the hand that wasn't bandaged.

This served to surprise Cal, as he didn't expect that from her.

However, even with an arm sliced off, with blood leaking from where it had once been attached, Shadow didn't seem to mind it all too much. "...so be it, Jillian." he sighed, before he suddenly vanished, reappearing right behind Jill. "You will have to go to sleep... forever." he said, before he mercilessly kicked her to the ground, before warping a distance from her. At that moment, electric sparks emitted from where his arm had once been.

Taking good use of Cal being surprised, Wiper suddenly let go of his shotgun, before grabbing Cal's arm that held the katana, just as he sunk his teeth into it. Strangely, despite Cal's body being composed of a metallic exo-skeleton, Wiper easily pierced through the metal with his teeth. And even stranger, Cal would feel some pain from this.

He sure did, giving out a pained cry before he took Wiper and threw him off. Then he came for the snake with his katana.

As for Jill, the kick sent her to the ground with a mouthful of sand. Then when she spat it out, she started to laugh.

This laugh caught Cal's attention, which caused him to stop charging at Wiper. "What's so funny?"

Jill didn't respond at first, as she kept laughing while getting up. "…is that the best Metal can do?" she said. "Seriously…"

"Wha?" Cal didn't understand it.

"Don't lose focus!" As Cal was preoccupied with what Jill said, Wiper suddenly rushed at Cal, grabbing the wrist of the hand holding the katana, before throwing rapid punches aimed at Cal's abdomen with his free hand, though punching solid metal didn't seem to injure Wiper one bit.

Shadow blinked, as he tilted his head. "...explain, Jillian." he said, as he raised his lone arm, ready for just about anything she could throw

at him.

"I have to admit, it was working at first," Jill said, a smile on her face as she brought up her sword with her own lone hand. "But if this is the best Metal can do to tamper with my emotions, he's going to have to do better than that! Don't think I haven't been through *this* scenario before!" Jill raised her sword above her pointed at the sky, as it started to take on a golden glow. Then she closed her eyes.

Thatta girl…don't get discouraged.

It's all thanks to your guidance…Sonic.

The moment Jill opened her eyes; she swung her sword, which sent out a massive, slash-like wave of golden energy straight for the Shadow android; kicking up sand as it came.

Having hand-like feet, Cal managed to stop Wiper's hand after a few punches. Then he gave Wiper two kick punches in the face, and he drew out his other katana for another attempted slice.

However, Wiper was quicker, and grabbed Cal's other hand as well, locking the two in place. "Can you feel it?" he hissed, as he grinned, showing off his fangs, which actually had something purple dripping from them. "It should take effect soon, Calculate."

Seeing the golden wave headed for him, Shadow pushed his arm forward, just as a barrier began forming around him. However, the wave was quicker, and struck him head-on, engulfing him in dust. However, as the dust cleared, something became apparent; parts of his body had been wiped out, revealing a metallic skin tone underneath. At that point, his eyes blackened, and his irises grew a menacing red.

Cal suddenly felt himself grow limp and collapse onto the ground. "You…" he growled, looking up at Wiper. It had been Wiper's poison, which was already beginning to paralyze the cyber-monkey.

Jill looked upon the sight that was supposedly Shadow. "So, this is what you are," she muttered.

Cal managed to raise his palm as it opened up, and he pointed it

toward Jill. *…sorry Jill,* he thought, just as he shot a massive beam of energy at her.

Jill, look out!

Jill, solely on reflex, spun around with her sword and deflected the blow into the water, causing a rather big explosion as well as a big splash that sprayed Jill and the fake Shadow.

Thanks

"…Damn," the monkey uttered, as his palm fell. Despite how fast his cybernetic body worked to clean out the poison, it would still leave him stunned for a little bit.

Wiper hissed, as he looked down at Cal, before grabbing his katanas. "You won't need these." he said, before looking at Jill. "Do you require assistance, Jill?" he asked, as he looked at the mechanized Shadow, who silently clenched his fist.

"Sure, why not?" Jill said with a shrug. "The more, the merrier." Then she turned to the fake Shadow. "Your turn to attack," she said with a big grin.

The robot Shadow nodded, as he began running at Jill, reeling his fist back.

"Let's do this, then." Suddenly, Wiper rushed in between Jill and the robot, grinning as it approached. Then, as it threw the punch, Wiper caught it, before stepping away from the fist's path, pulling the robot forward. Before it could regain its balance, Wiper suddenly grabbed hold of his head and shoulder, before sinking his teeth into the robot's neck, tearing out a good chunk of not only its throat, but some mechanical parts as well. "It's all you." he said, spitting out what he had removed with his bite.

"Okie-dokie," Jill said, bringing up her sword with her hand. Again, she sent out two more slash-like waves of golden energy at the fake Shadow which were enough to knock him back, and then she moved in to stab it square in the abdomen; since the waves left him no time to even attempt to dodge Jill impaling him with her sword

"...J-Jill-ill-Jil-an..." he uttered, as sparks began emitting from his body, the light in his eyes flickering.

"Something tells me that we don't want to be too close to him..." Wiper uttered, as he stepped away, nodding to Jill. "Get away from him." he hissed.

Jill said nothing as she retreated back a good distance, and the way she retreated was not just a simple jump back, but almost a sort of swift *glide* backwards, until her and Wiper were far enough from it.

Soon, what seemed like a shower of sparks shot out from it, as it collapsed on its back. "J-J-Jill..." was all it could utter, as the light vanished from its eyes, before it erupted into an explosion, leaving nothing but a smoking crater where it once lied.

"...a robot based on Shadow..." Wiper said with a hiss, as he folded his arms. "To have it be able to replicate Chaos Control... clever, but not enough."

"It was nowhere *near* as powerful as the real thing," Jill said, just as she turned and approached Cal. Then she held her sword at the monkey, which immediately stole his attention. "Alright," she said. "What was that thing; *exactly?* "

"…if you paid attention to the stories the Professor told you, you would already know," Cal replied in defeat, as he couldn't move still.

Jill thought back, wondering if there were any of Tails' stories that regarded copies of Shadow. At first, she assumed Cal was just trying to stall, up until she really did remember Tails saying something of the sort. "Hmph," she grunted. "An android huh? I thought Metal wouldn't really resort back to Eggman's creations… and I'm guessing that there's more than just one?"

Cal turned his head away, closing his eyes. "…yes," he said.

"Well, that doesn't sound good." Wiper said with a sarcastic tone, before he crouched down next to the monkey, glancing up at Jill. "I doubt that we should let him go alive; he's not likely to tell us anything regarding Metal Sonic."

"Like what, for instance?" Cal asked Wiper curiously.

"For instance, what he's currently planning on doing, especially if he's too lazy to come and kill us off on his own." Wiper hissed, before he stood up, glancing at Jill. "So, what should we do with him?"

"I'm sure Metal doesn't really care about him," Jill said, with her blade inching closer towards him.

"Of course he does," Cal said, as he slowly grinned, "…because I found out your little secret, Jillian."

That immediately made Jill uneasy, wondering what he meant, and when she glanced at her bandaged hand, she realized it with widened eyes. "You wouldn't!" she said, jabbing the tip of it in his neck.

"I would," he said, despite being poked uncomfortably.

Wiper frowned, as he glanced at Jill. "Listen, we can't stay around here for too long. If you're going to kill him, kill him now, and be done with it. The venom's not going to last forever."

Jill tried to keep herself from shaking as she raised up her sword and—

"My, my…you're not usually the type to take someone's life."

Jill shuddered at that voice, but before she could react in any other way, something shot out of the ground and kicked her in the face, sending her onto her backside.

It was a dark figure, but it moved much too fast for Wiper to even see. All that occurred was a sudden flicker of black, and before they knew it, Cal was gone.

Wiper blinked, as he looked around the area to try and see if he could find any trace of Cal, but to no avail. "...what the hell was that?" he hissed, before approaching Jill, grabbing her hand and pulling her on her feet. "You okay?"

Jill didn't answer at first. That voice she heard brought her tremendous dread. *I thought I got rid of her,* she thought.

Jill, relax…don't lose sight.

She finally let out a sigh. "I'm fine…for now," she said, just as she allowed her blade to depart in a flash of white light.

Wiper nodded, as he folded his arms. "...whatever that was, we know that there's a new player on the field." he hissed, before he moved towards his shotgun, still lying on the ground. "Not to mention that android... we could take care of one of those things with ease, but I doubt that everyone in your household could take on an army of them."

"Wiper, wait…"

Wiper stopped, as he glanced back at Jill. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Jill looked out at the ocean hesitantly, and then she turned to Wiper. "There's something I need to tell you," she said. "But…I know that whatever I say you'll have to report to your Commander. I ask that you wait on it until I'm ready to tell her myself the things I want to tell you."

Wiper blinked, as he looked away from Jill, before hissing. "...talk, then."

"I said that someone can stand up to Metal," she said. "Well…that someone is me."

Wiper closed his eyes. "...not too surprising. The Commander had a hunch." he said, as he picked up the shotgun. "Anything else?"

Jill nodded. She figured they knew, but part of her wanted to admit it anyway. "I know who attacked me just now," she said.

"Really, now..." Wiper mused, as he looked back at Jill. "And who was it? An old acquaintance?"

"...you couldn't really call it an *acquaintance,"* she said. "It'll be weird

to believe but...she was created by Deity Novagod, the vampire I told you about. He created her using an essence of mine; a chunk of my soul. Her name is Callous, and she is a representation of my inner demons, one could say...I thought I defeated her a long time ago."

Wiper hissed, as he shook his head. "...how could she have returned, if you had defeated her?"

"Well, towards the end of it all with Deity and whatnot, my memories haven't been the same," Jill said, as she and Wiper sat down on the sand. "Callous being defeated was one of my memories that were blurred. I went through a period of time when all the powers I had went away without warning after I defeated her and sealed Deity away, and nowadays, my powers came back. I believed it was a sign that everything was coming back, which is why I asked GUN to seal away that black emerald."

Wiper nodded, as he folded his arms. "But with this Callous back... do you think GUN will be able to contain Novagod?"

Jill looked at Wiper in despair. "To be perfectly honest...no. It's only a matter of time before she finds out where it is and goes after it..."

Cal wasn't quite coherent enough to understand where he was, but he knew three things: One, that he heard the loud roar of some engine, two, that the wind was hitting his face, and three, he was holding onto someone. It took awhile for Cal to try and wake up some more, and when he did, the wind stopped hitting his face. Whoever he held onto rose up away from his hold, and then the engine died out too with a crank.

"You're pretty lucky you know," said a voice; a female's voice. "You really weren't in any position to strike fear into her heart; she's unfortunately unpredictable."

Cal blinked constantly to try and wake up. Wherever he was, it was really dark, and the one he was trying to look at was not clear.

"Just give it a minute," she said. "The dark will do that to those who aren't used to it."

"The dark?" Cal rubbed his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about…"

"Not yet you don't."

Cal tried to look up at this mysterious person again, but he couldn't make them out in the dark. He did notice a very feminine figure on this individual though, and long frizzy hair. Whoever it was, they scooted closer to Cal, face-to-face in fact. "Who are you?" Cal asked, still half-dazed.

He managed to see this strange woman smile. "I'm whatever you want me to be," she chuckled.

Cal closed his eyes in irritation. "I can't play these games," he mumbled, reaching for the communicator.

"You're one to talk. You're crushing on the girl you're trying to kill."

Cal's eyes opened wide. "How'd you…?" He stopped, because he finally saw who this person was, and he was so shocked he was speechless. He even forgot that he had pressed the communicator linking with Metal.

She chuckled again, moving closer to him. "I have my ways."

"…Who are you?"

"Once again, I'm whatever you want me to be." Then before Cal knew it, a pair of lips met with his. At first it totally caught him off guard, but he found that he couldn't resist. He got lost in its alluring power, craving for more.

"You know, you certainly took your sweet time getting back in contact with me," an all-too familiar voice uttered. *"Explain yourself, Calculate. Where are you, what happened with the prototype, and who is in your present company?"*

Cal pulled away in shock. "Metal?" he croaked.

"Allow me," the strange woman said. "Your android thing was wiped out by not only the girl, but by that agent from GUN. As for where we are, well," she chuckled then, "that's my little secret."

"...and just who are you?" Metal responded coldly.

She chuckled again, "Well, I could tell you, but I'm sure Cal here has something he needs to tell you about the girl."

"I do?" Cal asked, and then he finally remembered, "I-I mean, yeah, I do."

"Ah, yes, that." Metal replied. *"But before you begin, please, tell me, Calculate... what events transpired that led to the prototype's destruction? You were observing without getting involved, weren't you? That was your sole objective."*

Without getting involved; those were the key words. Well, technically he didn't get involved since Wiper poisoned him. "At first she broke down crying seeing him, but having Wiper snapping her into her senses with the sound of his shotgun, she knew it couldn't be him. In fact, after awhile she started to laugh. She took that sword of hers and decimated it."

"Is that so..." Metal mused. *"Hmph... well, it went about as well as I could have expected. It is amusing, to think that his death still haunted her... but I'm sure that anyone could have snapped her out of it. Now, for*

the most important part regarding the prototype... were its battle capabilities up to standard?"

"Well, uh…" Cal wasn't quite sure what to say to that.

"Allow me to be frank, Metal Sonic," the woman suddenly spoke. "I vividly recall the girl saying that android was 'nothing *near* as powerful as the real thing.' She insulted it, and she insulted *you* ; simple as that."

"...hmph." was Metal's reply. *"With the technology used by Eggman, I'm not surprised. I guess they need some fine-tuning, then. Now, Calculate, tell me what you found out about Jillian."*

Cal grew a confident smile then. "Alright, well, you do recall that Jill had the ability to heal, right?"

" *Of course.* " Metal responded. " *She healed Shadow before I delivered the final blow to him... what about it, Cal?* "

"Well, I discovered that one of her hands was bandaged," Cal responded.

" *...so there is something she cannot heal.* " Metal mused, before chuckling. " *And as far as I'm concerned, the last time I saw her, she had no such bandages. What do you suppose could have caused that?* "

"Well, theory directs to that black emerald they've discovered," Cal said with pride. "She used it after all…"

" *The black emerald... if it could cause an injury to her, in which she cannot heal...* " Metal mused, before chuckling again. " *Perhaps we should invest in locating it. Maybe that is the key to nullifying her powers...* "

The woman burst into laughter, which startled Cal quite a bit. "Oh, I know where that emerald is," she said. "I also know you're not going to get it that easy. I believe they gave it to GUN and sealed it away…in the resting place of the so called 'Ultimate Life Form."

" *They've hidden it within Shadow's grave?* " Metal said with a small hint of surprise in his voice. " *...well, that is logical. I wouldn't have expected them to go to GUN, though... however, an attack on GUN at this point in time would only be a waste of resources. We'll have to postpone that plan, it seems... for now, Calculate, we should take advantage of her injury, and collect the remaining Chaos Emeralds.* "

"Actually," she interrupted. "I believe I can be of assistance to retrieve that emerald for you…after all, I am the only one besides the girl who knows exactly what it is."

"Jill knows what the black emerald is?" Cal questioned.

" *...you know, woman, you're making my curiosity grow.* " Metal

chuckled. " *Calculate, wherever you two are, why don't you bring your new friend to Westopolis, and we can discuss things in person. I wouldn't want any potential agents lurking nearby leaking this call to GUN.* "

"I would…if I knew where we were," Cal said nervously. "I was taken to this place when I was blacked out."

The woman smirked, while she sat back down in front of Cal. By now, Cal finally realized that he was sitting on a motorcycle, which would explain the sound of the engine he had heard earlier. She started revving up the handle making the engine roar. "We'll be there shortly," she said.

" *Good. I'm looking forward to meeting you, miss...?* "

"Callous," she answered with more chuckling. "No need for the 'miss' part." And with that, she took off on a wheelie, which caused Cal to tighten his grip around her in insecurity. The farther the motorcycle traveled, the dizzier Cal started to feel. He was falling into that same daze that he had come here in, and eventually, he blacked out.

Jill had spent time answering whatever questions Wiper had for her, and she went as far as explaining what had happened to them in the past three days; The Clubhouse, Mystic Ruins, Shadow's murder in Station Square, Metal's defeat, moving to HQ, Whisker, and pretty much the rest of the story until Wiper had been brought up to speed with what was going on now. Then when Wiper asked why she didn't want to admit she was the one who fought Metal, she sighed.

"Like you said before," she said. "I didn't want the publicity. I don't want to be a celebrity like Sonic the Hedgehog…he just made being a hero seem so fun, but in reality, no good deed goes unpunished."

"I see..." Wiper said, as he was sitting on the shore, looking out at the horizon. "...now I think I fully understand what you meant, back at the HQ." Then, he blinked. "Those powers of yours... do you suppose that there is a chance of you losing control of them?"

"It's happened before," Jill admitted. "Only under extreme stress though. My powers are very strange…they work accordingly to emotions, so if my mood is unstable, my powers will be too."

"I see..." Wiper nodded, before he stood up. "...since you were kind enough to answer my questions, I think it'd only be fair if I imparted some knowledge upon you." Then, he closed his eyes and hissed. "There's more to this month-long visit than what you see."

"Really?" Jill asked curiously as she looked at him. "Like what?"

"As I said, the Commander had a hunch regarding you and the black emerald." Wiper began, before he finally turned to face Jill. "When she spoke to me, she gave me three specific orders; one, to keep an eye on you, two, to report on anything out of the ordinary regarding you, and three..."

Jill looked at him curiously, and after awhile, "The third?"

"...the third was to not, under any circumstances, allow you to suffer any critical injury." Wiper eventually replied, as he hissed. "You could say that if I had to throw my own life away to save yours, I would have to do so. No questions asked."

"Just like Shadow," Jill sighed. Then she stood up from where she had sat on the sand. "Well, it sounds like those are solid orders. I really don't want people to die for me, but in your case, its—"

"Jill! Wiper!"

A voice interrupted her from behind, and when Jill turned to look, she saw Boomer pop out and head down the shore. Then when the duck saw them, she slowed down, looking relieved. "Oh good, you guys are alright," she huffed, trying to catch her breath.

"It was nothing big." Wiper said with a hiss. "Just an inferior copy and a conniving simian."

"Cal huh?" She supposed. "So it was a trap…but what does you mean by 'inferior copy?"

Jill let out another sigh. "Boomer, we've got some news to tell

everyone… *really bad* news."

The next time Cal woke up, he found himself in Westopolis. It was the same; the wind hitting his face, and the roar of the engine which was even noisier then it was in the dark. Finally, the motorcycle came to a stop.

"I'm assuming here, right?" Callous asked, as she stood up from the motorcycle and walked on the deserted streets of the city. "So where's your friend, huh?"

Cal was still too disoriented to answer, as he rubbed his brow.

" *Right here, Callous.* " At that moment, they'd see a blue, metallic hedgehog walk out of the darkness, approaching the pair. " *It's very nice to- wait...* what?!" he uttered upon seeing Callous.

Right as Callous saw Metal, Cal would also finally see the full view of this woman. In the dark, he thought he was seeing things, but now he knew that it wasn't his eyes playing tricks. This woman, despite having frizzy hair, makeup, and some sexy biker chick get-up, looked very identical to Jill; *too* identical to be true.

"Humina, humina, humina…" Cal muttered with widened eyes.

"What's the matter with you two?" Callous asked with her hands on her hips.

" *You...* " Metal uttered, before he composed himself, shooting Cal a glare. " *My apologies, Callous. For a moment, you made me mistake you for Jillian. Let me guess; separated at birth?* "

Callous burst into laughter at what Metal said. "Please," she said, while laughing. "You're too much!" She laughed so hard she had to wipe a tear away when she finished laughing. Then she took in a deep breath. "It's not like that," she finally said. "Sure, we've got a connection like twin sisters, but we've got a different story; a quite cliché one I might add."

Cal worked through his shock enough to raise an eyebrow at

Callous. "Define cliché," he said.

"You've heard her little sob story about that vampire, right?" she started. "Well, he stole a part of her soul and with his blood, sweat and tears, he created little ol' me; only without so much sweat and tears. Daddy, which is what I usually call the vampire since it makes sense, created me for the purpose of, eventually, killing her." Then she smirked at Metal. "Gee, that sounds familiar, doesn't it Metal? We seem to have more things in common than you think."

Metal nodded, as he chuckled. *"So it seems, Callous, but we can discuss parallels between past figures later; right now, we have business to attend to. I recall you saying something about just what the black emerald is?"*

"Right," she said. "Well, so far, you've found that you can't put a scratch on her, and when you do, she simply heals it up," she said. "Purity, an energy that intertwines with Chaos. She doesn't fully understand it yet, and judging by the fact Daddy made me from her, neither do I. But right now, I certainly know more than she does."

"The point?" Cal asked.

"Simply put, the logical way of opposing a force is to pit it against its *polar opposite.* Purity has properties of the element of light, so the opposite of that would be… *darkness* ." After she said that, she held up her palm and from it, it started out as black smog but it eventually transformed into some sort of black energy to show them. "I happen to possess that very power that opposes Purity, and that black emerald also holds it; an energy called Corruption."

"Corruption..." Metal repeated, as he hummed. *"...so let me see if I'm crystal clear on this. The only thing that can nullify the energy called Purity is the power you possess, Corruption. Doesn't that, in return, work*

the other way around?"

"It can," she admitted, "but it just depends of the balance between the entities. If Corruption is stronger, then it will prevail over Purity, and vice versa. Corruption is highly, and I repeat, *highly* unstable

and unpredictable. Anyone in the past who's attempted to control this energy becomes corrupted themselves, besides a few; the few regarding me, and my father."

"And because Jill fears it so much," Cal said, "she would often lose when it came to battling it."

"Bingo," Callous responded, as her smirk grew.

Metal nodded, as he folded his arms. *"...this has left me intrigued."* He muttered, before he glanced at Callous. *"But those who have tried controlling Corruption in the past... they have all been human, have they not?"*

"Not all of them were humans," she said. "Some were Mobians too…even the one you know the best." She chuckled, "yes Metal, even Sonic the Hedgehog tried to learn more about this power, but he quickly figured out what it was…"

Cal was baffled. "Wait a minute, how do you—!"

"Like I said," Callous said. "I have my ways."

"..." Metal eyed Callous curiously. *"...do you believe that such a power would be able to corrupt machinery?"*

"Hm," Callous rubbed her chin thoughtfully while looking at Metal. "It's hard to know. Not normally, since robots don't usually have a mind of their own, but you're an AI so…" Callous shrugged as she turned her back to them, "…it's possible."

"Those who try to control it," Cal murmured in wondering. "What about those just subjected to it?"

Callous turned around with a cheeky grin, sauntering up to Cal with a finger under his chin, bringing him closer. "Depends," she said. "Care to be specific?"

"Uh," Cal couldn't stop himself from turning red in the face. Not that he meant it in a way that she was implying, but still.

" *I see...* " Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. " *...it could be what*

I need, but I don't wish to risk losing myself to that power. This requires testing... and I think I know what to use. "

"What?" Cal asked, turning to Metal.

Metal chuckled. " *The Shadow Androids. With enough testing, along with the modifications I need to make on them, they could be able to channel Corruption without being affected negatively by it.* "

"Well, that's quite a plan," Callous chuckled, stepping away from Cal. "So, you're intending to send the army of Shadow androids after that little rag-tag group of kids, I'm guessing?"

" *Not at first.* " Metal said, as he eyed Callous. " *Before I can send an entire army after them, I need to do some field tests, until the formula for success is perfected.* "

"I see," Callous said. "I will let you know now, that if you plan to do that, you have to use the black emerald; not me."

" *...very well.* " Metal said with a nod, before he turned away from Cal and Callous. " *However, if it's locked away within Shadow's tomb, then we'll have to lay out a strategy to invade the GUN fortress. Until we can perfect one like that, we'll have to focus on collecting the Chaos Emeralds.* "

"Hey, how about this? You leave the black emerald to me, and you two just worry about those silly Chaos Emeralds," suggested Callous.

"Alright, hold up," Cal said. "You're being awfully generous here…is there something you're expecting in return for all this?"

"Who me?" Callous questioned playfully, pointing to her. "What could I possibly want?"

" *To be frank, Callous, you know a lot about this black emerald.* " Metal said, as he looked back at Callous. " *To anyone with a functioning brain cell, that is a bit suspicious. I hope you won't mind some company to get that emerald.* "

At that moment, he held out his hand to her, just as something

formed in his hand; it was a small figurine of Metal Sonic, almost a perfect replica in terms of design. " *If you would keep this on you, I would appreciate it.* "

Callous' smirk turned into a frown as she took up the figurine. "What is it?" she asked apathetically, while tossing it up and down in her hand. "Some sort of toy?"

Cal was actually quite curious what it was, himself.

" *In the grand scheme of things, yes.* " Metal replied with a chuckle. " *Let's just say that it will serve as a link between you and me, Callous.* "

"Goodie…" she groaned, as she caught the figurine the last time. On her motorcycle, a small pocket appeared from a puff of black smoke, and then she placed the figurine inside the pocket. "It'll be kept here if you're worried about it," she grumbled.

"Now what's the matter with you?" Cal asked, finding her change of mood odd.

"I get random mood swings, and the fact that I have a babysitter doesn't help," Callous said. "On a side note, hers and my moods are connected. When she feels pain, I feel pleasure, and so on." She turned to Metal again. "She's already aware I've come back, and that tattle-tale's probably telling her friends what she found out. Right now, she's feeling hope for some reason."

"Hope?" Cal cocked his head curiously.

"Who knows why…" Callous shrugged, "…when she feels hope, it just makes me want to vomit."

" *I see...* " Metal nodded, as he folded his arms. " *Best of luck to you during your mission, Callous. And don't forget to bring your toy with you into the building.* " he added with a chuckle.

"Sure, whatever," Callous said with a wave, just as she climbed aboard her motorcycle. "But you'd better not blow my cover while I'm in there. I happen to know a thing or two about stealth." Then with that, she revved up the motorcycle and drove off, leaving Cal and

Metal in the street. Once she turned a corner, strangely enough, they could no longer hear the engine, and everything fell silent.

" *...so, Calculate, what did you make of her?* " Metal asked Cal, without looking at the monkey.

Cal jumped when he asked that. "Hey, don't get the wrong idea; *she* kissed me!" he said quite defensively.

" *That's not what I meant.* " Metal said with a groan. " *Honestly, the minds of organics... I meant about her spontaneously aiding our cause; what do you make of that?* "

"Oh, sorry," Cal uttered with embarrassment. It was apparent he wasn't really paying much attention. "It's obvious that she's aiming for something, and it could be that aiding us will help her gain what she wants," he said. "Judging by the fact she didn't ask anything of us, I'd say that she might be using us to get to something…"

" *That's what I figured, as well.* " Metal said, as he shook his head. " *Still, we get one step closer to getting rid of the threat Purity poses with this help... but you should especially be wary of Callous, Calculate; she seems to have taken a liking to you.* "

"Yeah I pretty much figured that out…" Cal said, scratching his head nervously. If what Callous said was true about her connection with Jill, he figured since Jill didn't want him that Callous would, but Jill was honest and Callous wasn't, so who was to say that she wasn't just trying to deceive him? All in all, Cal understood Metal's warning. "So…about those Chaos Emeralds," he said, changing the subject.

" *Yes, them...* " Metal nodded, as he turned to face Cal. " *Since Jill is injured, I doubt that they'll bring her to try and find them just yet. That should simplify things for you.* " he said, before he closed his eyes. " *While I upgrade the Shadow Androids, you follow the signals and collect the emeralds. As long as we keep them away from Jill, things should go by smoothly.* "

Cal nodded, "Yes sir." He remembered that Wiper had taken his katanas, but he wasn't going to tell Metal that; especially when he could replace them easily with a much better pair.

Chapter 12

CHAPTER TWELVE

"So…let me get this straight…" Boomer said. "Metal doesn't just have one Shadow android, but you're saying he might have an entire army?"

Jill nodded uneasily. She had just gotten done telling the audience in front of her the news; the audience consisting of Boomer, Team Alpha, Tails, Brick, and Charmy. Cream was busy with the kids, since this information wouldn't exactly be comforting for them.

"I wouldn't put it past him." Tails said with a sigh. "But I am curious as to why Eggman never scrapped the androids altogether, after the Black Arms Invasion..."

"No worries, y'know!" Newt said, as he butted his fists together. "We can take on a bunch of androids without any problems, y'know!"

"Unlikely," Natal responded dryly, as she inspected the two katanas Wiper had brought back with slight disinterest.

"Even though some of us have combat training, Newt..." Wiper chimed in, as he hissed. "...I doubt that everyone here could take on an army of them."

"Professor…" Jill said, now growing even more uneasy. "…I saw Callous."

Hearing that, Tails closed his eyes, and gave out a heavy sigh. "...then I doubt that the seal will last..." he muttered, before he looked up at Jill. "Did you see where she went?"

"No such luck." Wiper replied, as he folded his arms. "She took Calculate and vanished before we could figure out just what happened."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait…" Brick said. "…who is this Callous girl?"

"I'll tell you later Brick," Jill said. "Anyhow, knowing that she ran off with Cal, then she's already met Metal. If that's the case, then…" She turned away, feeling upset. "…they know. They know what that black emerald is, and they know what it can do to me."

Wiper grunted, as he hissed. "If they know, there's no doubt that they plan to infiltrate GUN and collect it."

"But come on, Wiper! The thing's locked away in the most secure place, y'know!" Newt shot in, as he looked at Wiper. "There's just no way that they could hope to get it, y'know!"

"I wouldn't say that..." Tails said, as he sighed. "I am aware of how high the security of that base is, but there's no telling if Metal won't do something reckless and invade the base."

"Unacceptable," Natal said with a sour tone, as she continued inspecting the two blades.

"Brownie, don't freak out, please," Brick said, noticing her mood as he put his hands on her shoulders.

Jill placed her head on his shoulder, and strangely enough, she started to cry. "All those years of fighting him!" she sobbed. "All that time of hanging on and trying to survive, of building my strength, wasted!" Brick was surprised that Jill started crying, but he hugged her as she wept in his shoulder.

Seeing this, Tails couldn't help but sigh, as he looked away from Jill.

"...that settles it." Wiper suddenly said, just as he stood up. "Newt, Natal, we're leaving." As he said this, both the salamander and bullfrog looked at him with surprise.

"W-wait a minute, Wiper!" Newt protested, as he looked at Wiper with surprise. "Just like that? Y'know, we're supposed to stay here for a month!"

"Unusual," Natal said, as she raised an eyebrow whilst looking at the snake.

"If the problem is the danger of that emerald falling into enemy

hands..." Wiper grunted, as he cracked his neck, before he hissed, "...then we'll make sure it stays out of them. Got that, Team Alpha?"

"Then you'll be disrespecting the Commander's orders," Boomer said. "That is, unless we come with you."

"Brownie, please," Brick murmured to her. He really didn't like to see her cry like this, but truth be told, Jill was really scared. Even though she acted like it was nothing bad earlier, she still felt the build-up inside, and now it was just letting itself out.

Wiper glanced at Boomer when this remark came up. "...if you insist." He said, as he closed his eyes. "But it's going to be rough. I wouldn't go there unprepared."

"Of course not," Boomer said. "I'm always prepared." Then she turned to Brick. "Why don't you stay here with her, and watch the kids?" she asked him. "I might take Whisker this time, after I tell him what's up that is. She'll probably need your company, and she's not really in any condition to go into a fight."

Brick remembered her bandaged hand, and gave Boomer a nod.

"I might actually come this time too," Charmy said, getting up from his seat.

Wiper looked towards Charmy with a hint of surprise in his eyes. "Are you sure?" he inquired.

"If he's set on it, then I doubt that we'll be able to dissuade him." Tails said, as he stood up as well. "I'll stay here with the others."

"Alright," Boomer said with a nod. "I'm going to get Whisker." Then as Boomer walked out the door, Jill wiped away her eyes from crying in Brick's shoulder.

"Settle down girl," Brick comforted.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "I shouldn't bottle up my feelings like this…"

"C'mon," Brick said, taking her down the hall. "Maybe you just need

to be alone for awhile."

Watching the two walk away, Wiper gave out a low hiss. "Whenever you're ready to leave, tell us." he said, as he gave Charmy a nod, before he, Newt and Natal headed out of the room as well.

Charmy then turned to Tails. "Well, this certainly is a turn of events isn't it?"

"I'll say..." Tails sighed, before he looked at Charmy. "You'll be alright?" he asked, as he placed a hand on the bee's shoulder.

"I'll be fine," Charmy said with a nod. "I just hope Jill will be alright. I never knew all those things about her, and I'm sorry that a time like now is when I'm told all those things."

"True..." Tails nodded, as he looked at where Jill and Brick had left. "...given enough time, I think she'll recover. But not without help."

It was a long time after those heading for the GUN base had left, and Jill had fallen asleep, which wasn't all that surprising to Brick. At least she was at peace for now, which relieved him as he watched her sleep. He really thought that Jill was overreacting, but he also didn't know the kind of things Jill went through that made her so emotional.

But enough hanging around. Brick knew that he couldn't linger at her side constantly, or it would go from wanting to take care of her to being overprotective. He got up from where he sat and left the room, gently closing the door behind him.

In the meantime, Jill soon realized that she was having another one of her dreams…

I was wandering aimlessly in that fog again. I continued to wander to the point that the fog started to fade away, and I found myself walking into another strange place. They looked like ruins of some sort, placed in the middle of a great field. Stepping up a flight of stairs, I stopped. I saw someone standing there by some more ruins, leaning against them. I knew him, so I approached him.

" *Shadow," I said. "What are you doing here?"*

"Not much; taking in the scenery, for one thing." he replied bluntly. "What about you, Jill?"

I sighed in disdain. "I haven't been doing so well lately." Then I looked at Shadow. "I don't know what to do. I feel like my past is coming back to haunt me…and I'm afraid of what's going to happen."

Shadow briefly glanced at me, before he sighed. "Tell me about it... I've been down that road as well." he said, before he pushed himself away from the wall. "But even when the past came to haunt me... I moved onward. Some things in life, you just have to let go of." Then, he turned to face me. "I let go of my past, to ensure that the present and future remained safe. Eventually, maybe you have to do so as well."

I felt that he was right, but a good portion of me was still unsure. "I still feel lost…" I said. "Once I let go of my past, how do I move forward?" I looked away in shame. "I guess I lived in my past so long I don't know how."

"For one thing, you don't do it by yourself." he said, as he placed a hand on my shoulder. "Back then, I had friends to help me move on. Tails, Sonic, Amy, Knuckles, Rouge... I'm sure that your friends will help you, too."

" *Friends," I immediately thought of them when he said that; Brick, Ani, Jack, Striker, Milo, and Buddy, then the Chaotix, and even the Professor. I also remembered what they always said to me: that I wasn't alone anymore. This made me smile. "Thanks Shadow," I said.*

"Glad I could help," Shadow said, as he let go of me, before turning away. "...when you see Tails again, greet him for me."

I blinked hearing that request, and before I could open my mouth to answer—

"Hey Jill!"

Jill opened her eyes, and saw that she was surrounded by kids; Jack, Striker, Milo, Ani, and Rudy. She sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes. "Hi guys," she said. "What's up?"

"Nothing much," Milo replied. "We just wanted to check on you… Brick told us you were crying."

"He did, did he?" Jill said.

"Yeah, he did." Jack said with a nod. "He seemed a bit down, too... you're both gonna be alright, right?"

Jill paused a minute, scooting to the side of the bed where the kids gathered closer. While thinking about the dream she had, she smiled. "Yeah, we're going to be okay," she said. "I just bottled up my feelings, and I had to let them out."

"That's not good to do Jill," Striker said. "It's like shaking a soda! You shake it up so much that it finally explodes!"

"And it's even worse with some types of soda!" Jack agreed. "If you spill that, you can't clean it away like you usually do; it leaves stains all over!"

Jill started to giggle. "Yeah, I guess that's bad," she said. "But you can still clean it, it just takes awhile. Just like everything else, it takes time, but you'll get it."

"That's right!" Ani said. "So everything's going to be okay Jill!"

Jill felt so much better right now and she felt something she hadn't felt in a long time.

Hope.

"Yeah, everything's going to be okay," Jill said. "You guys are the best."

"Aaw, it was nothing, Jill." Jack said with a brief laugh. "Glad we could help!"

"We don't want to see you cry anymore, okay?" Striker said.

Jill nodded. "Okay, I won't cry anymore."

"You have to pinky-swear Jill!" Striker continued, as he held out his own pinkie to Jill. "And remember, you can't cry unless you really have to!"

Jill reached for Striker's pinkie with her own. "I pinky-swear," she said.

She made sure to park the motorcycle somewhere far beyond the reach of any patrolling units around the area, and she was standing on a hill, looking down at the GUN base while leaning against a tree. "Hmph," Callous grunted. "This would be too easy…"

"So, how are we holding up?" she'd hear a familiar voice say, though it didn't seem to come from anywhere in particular. *"Not thinking of backing out, I hope."*

Callous rolled her eyes, while looking back at the motorcycle where the figurine was. "Course not," she replied. "I just think it wouldn't be all that fun without causing a little trouble first."

"And I thought you said that you were proficient in stealth..." the voice chuckled . *"So, what do you have planned, Callous?"*

"I can slip in there before anyone has a chance to guess what's going on," Callous said, and then she smirked. "Once I have the emerald in my possession, then I'll go out with a big bang. I'll make sure to damage their forces enough to keep them from being able to stop you."

"I think I like the sound of that..." the voice responded. *"Go for it, then. We're waiting for you in Westopolis."*

"Sure thing," Callous said, with a wave as she walked down the hill.

Meanwhile…

"Whiskers, do you detect anything in the area so far?" Boomer asked.

"No, canna say that I do, ma'am..." Whisker replied, as he scouted around him. "...hang on. Thar be somethin'... but 'tis faint. Whatere 't is, I haven`t felt anythin' like 't before... I think."

"Then we oughta hurry, y'know!" Newt said, as he was fully strapped with not only the jetpack and flamethrower, but the Stinger as well. For convenience's sake, Newt had allowed Boomer to borrow his vulcan cannon.

"Rushing in isn't going to do us any favors." Wiper said, as he gave Natal a nod. "You go ahead and scout; we'll cover you."

"Affirmative." Natal nodded, as she weighed the sheathed Nodachi hanging on her back, along with the two new scabbards for the two katanas, before she ran ahead of the group.

Charmy looked out of place since he didn't seem to carry any weapons with him, almost as if he was just tagging along. "Alright," he said to everyone. "Wiper and I are going to see the Commander. Boomer, stay out here with Newt and Whisker and keep an eye on things. If you see Metal, Cal, or this Callous girl, I want you to contact me ASAP. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," Boomer nodded.

"Aye, sir!" Whisker said with a salute.

"Leave it to us, y'know!" Newt said, as he pounded his fists together.

"We're counting on you." Wiper said, before he gave Charmy a nod. "Let's go."

"Right," Charmy said, as the two of them continued ahead on foot, leaving Boomer, Whisker, and Newt gathered together.

"Okay you two," Boomer said, turning to them. "I don't want you bickering with each other at a time like this. You saw how Jill was; this thing is super dangerous and we can't let Metal Sonic get his hands on it." Boomer knew she couldn't order Newt around, but she figured she had gotten used to it since Whisker listened to her.

"Don`t worry, ma'am; I`ll behave like a true gentleman!" Whisker

said, as he proudly placed his hands on his hips.

"I'll behave, too." Newt said, as he looked after Wiper and Charmy. "...but only because Wiper'd berate me if I did something to screw up, y'know."

Boomer hauled the Vulcan cannon up to her shoulder, keeping a sharp eye around. "Good," she said. "Now, I think we ought to split up ourselves, so that we can cover more ground."

In the meantime, Charmy and Wiper had reached the front gates of the base.

"A-Agent Wiper!" one of the guards uttered. "We- we weren't expecting you back for a month!"

"I have a report to deliver." Wiper said, as he glanced at the two guards, hissing.

"A-and the old man?" the other guard said, though this only made Wiper glare at him. "Eh- I'm sorry, sir! Don't mind me!"

"Good." Wiper hummed, before the gates opened. With a nod to Charmy, the two ventured inside.

However, what the guards wouldn't notice is a crawling shadow that slipped underneath Charmy's feet, and it began to act as Charmy's shadow as the two of them walked on through the base.

Charmy pulled out a communicator that looked like a bee; the symbol for the Chaotix since, after all, Charmy had been the original mascot. "Boomer, anything yet?" he asked it.

" *Nothing yet,"* Boomer responded through the line. *"I don't think they'd come that quickly Captain."*

"Doesn't hurt to be careful," Charmy replied. "For all we know, they could've been here before us. Just keep your wits about."

" *Yes sir."*

When Charmy withdrew the communicator, he looked at Wiper

curiously. "What are you planning to tell your Commander? Last I remember, Jill didn't want to tell her who she was."

"Don't worry; I have a plan going." Wiper said, as he gave Charmy a nod. Eventually, the two of them reached the doors leading into the commanders office, and without a word, Wiper opened them, showing that the chair was once more turned around, with cigarette smoke flowing from behind it.

"Agent Wiper... you're back earlier than I ordered." a female voice said, though the chair didn't turn to face them. "And I see you brought a guest... Charmy the Bee, current leader of the Chaotix Detective Agency."

"Yes Ma'am." said Charmy. "We bring some...unfortunate news." Then he looked over at Wiper to let him take it away.

Wiper nodded, as he cleared his throat. "Commander, we have reason to believe that Metal Sonic is-"

"Trying to snatch the black emerald?" the commander said from behind the chair, still without facing the pair. "Agent Wiper, tell me something new."

Wiper blinked, as he approached the commander's chair. "How did you-" At that moment, the door behind Wiper and Charmy slammed shut, locking it. "What?"

"Now, Mr. Charmy..." the commander said once more. "...perhaps you would care to explain what my agent is doing here, disrespecting orders like that?"

Without anyone noticing, the shadow underneath Charmy scurried away underneath the door.

"Ma'am," Charmy said. "We don't only believe its Metal Sonic, but we might think that he is using a certain agent to infiltrate the base…"

"It doesn't matter who he sent to retrieve the emerald." the commander replied, though the chair still didn't budge. "As you may know, Agent Wiper, the only way to enter those chambers is not only

with voice-recognition, but with a specific code... a code only I know of."

"But what if this agent corners you? She would likely kill you so she could obtain the-" Wiper began, though at that point, the commander began laughing quite loudly. "...Commander?"

"Please, Agent Wiper. Do you think I would allow myself to be captured by some rogue agent, let alone killed?" At that point, the chair finally turned around, though what would meet Wiper and Charmy was not the GUN Commander, but an unconscious trooper, taped to the chair, with a taped-on cigarette between his fingers; the commander's voice came from a communicator.

"...what is this?" Wiper uttered, as he inspected the soldier, just as the commander laughed again.

"I left the base not too long ago for private reasons, though no one but me, you two and this man knows about this. But I should thank you... if someone is planning to steal the emerald away, they certainly won't go undetected." At that point, just as the doors were unlocked, alarms and sirens began wailing all across the base.

Charmy closed his eyes with a nod. "Well, I say she had it under control," he said, before he turned to Wiper. "She sure had me fooled."

"That Commander..." Wiper uttered, as he rubbed his temples. "She's not like her predecessors at all." he said, before he turned to Charmy. "In any case, the entire base is probably under heavy security as we speak. All we have to do is to find our target before they can escape the base."

"Who knows, our target might already be in the building," Charmy said, as he turned around and walked out of the room. "To think, that Espio's teachings wouldn't go to waste for once," he chuckled.

Voice-activation? A code? Yeah right…heheh. I've broken into more secure safes. I knew this would be a piece of cake.

She heard the alarms from above, but they sounded quite distant. That's what the dark did; it distanced reality. Anyhow, she knew she was where she wanted to be, so she headed for the surface…

Upon reaching the surface, one thing would become painfully apparent; it was cold in there. With only one wall separating the main building from what basically amounted to a massive freezer, it was no wonder that such a complicated lock had been made for it.

Not to say that it was just a large freezer, but one would think so with actual snow and ice covering large portions of the room. Further ahead, smaller rooms were visible; likely used for research. What she would look for, however, was behind a large steel door, sealed off with a valve.

Callous could see her breath as a thick puff of fog, but the cold somehow didn't seem to bother her. Seeing that large steel door, she could sense what she was looking for was behind it. She also noticed that the valve was frozen over, so simply turning it wouldn't be simple.

But she took the valve anyway, attempting to turn it. At first it didn't budge, but then the ice around it started to crack. With a smirk, she forced it once more and the ice shattered, allowing her to turn it. Then she pulled it open, wondering what exactly she would find besides what she was looking for.

As the door opened, she would come face to face with even more snow and ice, to the point that one would have expected to have wandered into tundra. However, by the end of the room, three equally-sized capsules were standing.

"Well," Callous chuckled to herself, walking to these capsules. "I wonder what buried treasure I'll find here." She came up to one of the capsules, and she wiped away the frost that hid what was inside.

What she would see was a black hedgehog with red stripes going across his quills resting inside of the capsule. That was the 'coffin' of Shadow the Hedgehog, keeping his body perfectly preserved.

Callous looked at him with a smirk. "Ah, hello there Shadow," she

said. "What a shame I didn't get to meet you before you died." She turned away, walking to another one. "…perhaps my father can figure out a way to introduce me to you," she chuckled to herself, as she wiped away the frost on the next one.

In there, she'd find the bounty she had been looking for; a black emerald, though it, along with the entire interior of the capsule, was encased in solid ice.

As she would inspect this capsule, however, the last one began convulsing.

"Iced over hm?" She murmured. "Shouldn't be a problem…" then she noticed the last one out of the corner of her eye, and she continued to watch it in case it started to do anything else.

The last capsule only continued to convulse, and after a short while, Callous would hear something akin to roars coming from it. Then, someone from within began banging on the capsule door from the inside, as if it attempted to get out.

Callous stepped over to the last one as if it was nothing, looking at it curiously. "Well, somebody wants to come out and play," she mused, smirking again.

The roars from the capsule intensified, just as the convulsions subsided. Then... "LET ME OUT OF HERE!!!" she would hear a dark, female voice say from within it.

"Now, I wonder who that is?" Callous said, pressing her finger to her lips curiously. Then she shrugged, wondering what she really had to lose. "Sit tight, whoever you are," she said. After she leaped up in the air, she fell back toward the capsule with a drop kick aimed for the glass to break it.

And break it did, along with loosening the hinges of the capsule's door. With another roar, the prisoner suddenly pushed the door away from the door, causing it to land on the other side of the room. "...who are you?" she uttered, just as she stepped out of the capsule; a female, black-furred bear.

"No one of any importance," Callous replied with a playful smirk. "But you…my, you must have done something *really* bad to be locked up in here."

The bear growled, as she gave the capsule a punch. "I was part of a coup against GUN... but the other conspirators left me to take the fall when it failed. It's been five months now..." she uttered, before folding her arms. "What is your purpose here? I doubt that it was to free me."

"What, you don't remember me?" Callous laughed then. "Just kidding. You're right; it's not to free you. I'm here for a prize." Then she walked back over to the second one which held the black emerald. "If you're aware how long you've been in here, you must have been aware of other things," she said, just for the sake of conversation.

"A few." the bear replied, as she followed Callous with her eyes. "For instance, Shadow the Hedgehog's death. A pity... he was a true warrior. Unlike other agents in this organization..." she said, before growling in disgust. "And that gem... I heard that it was listed as a BSO by the higher-ups."

"Really?" Callous chuckled, as she leaped up and drop-kicked the glass of the capsule, breaking it as well. "Imagine what they would think of it when they actually see with their own eyes what it is, and what it can do." When she picked up the black emerald, her smirk grew. She felt its power indefinitely. *Hello Daddy…*

The bear seemed fairly uninterested in the gem, as she instead walked up to Shadow's capsule, placing her hand against the glass. With a sigh, she closed her eyes. "...how do you intend to leave?" she asked, before she glanced at Callous.

"With a big bang," Callous said, hiding away the black emerald. "I'm going to diminish their forces when I leave here, you know, start some trouble." Then she looked back at the bear. "What about you, huh?" She asked amusingly. "What's your name?"

The bear closed her eyes, before she looked back at Shadow's capsule. "...Dusk the Bear. But call me Queen; that's what I was

known as before the coup." she said.

"Well Queen," Callous said, "now that you've been freed, what do you plan to do?" She headed for the large steel door with the valve, but stopped, looking back at Queen for her answer.

Without a word, Queen suddenly grabbed hold of Shadow's capsule, before ripping it right out of the ground. "If you would allow it... let us follow you." she said, as she turned to face Callous, holding the capsule over her shoulder.

Callous raised her brow in interest by this act, but she figured she would find out about it later. She smirked again, "My name is Callous, Queen," she said. "And if you want to follow me, I'm going to tell you right now there won't be any turning back beyond this point. You ready?"

Queen nodded, as she walked up next to Callous, giving the ewe a nod. "Lead the way, Callous."

Callous chuckled, turning around as she walked out the steel door. Then she started off in a sprint, which advanced to a faster run. While crossing her arms, dark energy began to build around her, and thanks to that black emerald, a whole lot of it built up around her in a short period of time, heading for the wall that split the cryolab and the GUN facility.

BOOM!!!

"What was that?!" A GUN soldier blurted, hearing an explosion that came from down the hall.

"It..." another GUN soldier uttered, as he reached for his weapon. "It came from the cryolab! But how... the alarms went off! It should be under complete lockdown!"

Behind the corner of where those soldiers stood, Wiper and Charmy were eavesdropping. *The cryolab?* Wiper thought, as he hissed lowly. *Not possible... how could anyone have broken through?* Then, he gave Charmy a look. "Head outside, and get Newt, Boomer and Whisker over here. I'll get in contact with Natal."

Despite how bad the situation was, Charmy looked unreasonably calm, as he gave Wiper a nod, heading the other way down the hall. He took out his communicator and pressed on it. "Boomer," he said. "Gather the other two and head for the base, pronto! Our target has already infiltrated the building."

" *WHAT?!"*

Meanwhile, Callous was the first to step out of the rubble, as she brought upon a mighty chill through the hallways. A couple GUN soldiers came down the hall, and when they saw her, one of them shuddered. "Oh my g-god!" he stuttered. "Isn't that…the girl that came here earlier?!"

"Close, but no cigar," Callous responded.

"H-how did you get in there?!" the other one demanded, as he aimed his rifle at Callous, just as he heard some thumping. "Eh?"

Then, Queen stepped out from the rubble, still carrying the capsule, as she glared coldly at the soldiers. "Tsch..."

"H-hang on a sec..." the soldier uttered, as he slowly backed away. "Th-that's Queen! The former leader of Team Delta! How did she get loose?!"

"I'm sure you can figure it out for yourself," Callous said, holding out her hands. Two long streams of black energy appeared, which solidified into two long whips that she took into her hands.

"What are you doing?!" the first one asked, just as he would fire, but in a flash, it was yanked out of his grip, along with something slapping him across the face. As it turned out, Callous' whip had taken his gun away. Then she did the same to the other soldier, and when he was disarmed as well, she threw them both against the wall, knocking them unconscious.

As she did that, however, another squad of soldiers passed around the corner, keeping their weapons aimed on Callous and Queen. "Both of you, freeze!"

"Weaklings..." Queen muttered, just as she placed the capsule

against the wall, before she glared at the soldiers, which made them freeze to the spot in fear. "...you're no warriors!" Then, at a speed not detectable to the human eye, she rushed at the troops and basically tore them to shreds within seconds, leaving not one of them alive. "What a waste..." she muttered, before she walked back to Callous, picking up the capsule again.

"Yeah, no kidding," agreed Callous. Then she motioned with her head to head out. "This way," she said, running in the said direction.

"I can't believe it!!!" Boomer screamed furiously, running toward the gates. "How did they get past us?!?!"

"I got nay idee, ma'am!" Whisker responded, as he and Newt were running right behind her. "Who ere did 't must be some expert at stealth!"

"In any case, how come Natal couldn't discover anyone doing anything, y'know?" Newt chimed in, as he looked towards the base. "I hope she's not in trouble, or anything, y'know!"

Boomer kept running as she thought, and then she spoke her thoughts aloud. "Natal didn't find anything…Metal couldn't have come, he'd still be detected even if he could disguise himself as someone else, and Cal couldn't get past them either, no matter how good at stealth he might be!" Then it hit her, and when it did, she started to run faster. "It must have been that Callous girl Jill talked about!"

For some reason, Boomer was so intently focused on getting there, and soon enough, she got through the gates and into the building.

Before she could get too far into the building, however, she felt someone grab her shoulder. "Dangerous." As it turned out, it was Natal, who was looking ahead with a concerned expression on her face. "Don't go in." she added, just as Newt and Whisker caught up with them.

"What do you mean 'don't go in?" Boomer demanded. "We've got a

—!!!"

BOOM!

An explosion cut her off, followed by a series of gunfire and screams.

"Danger." Natal said briefly, as she stood in front of Boomer, looking intently at the halls in front of her. "True danger."

"What kinda danger is that? Nothing I've heard of, y'know!" Newt shot in, as he hoisted his Stinger over his shoulder, aiming it at the halls, whilst keeping a sturdy grip on the flamethrower.

"Whatere'tis, we ortin' t' be ready fer a brawl!" Whisker said, as he walked next to Boomer, clenching his fists.

Machine parts and gun men were blown back a distance, left to lie on the ground as whatever menace that caused it was moving forward. Boomer brought up the Vulcan cannon to get ready…

Then around the corner they came. Callous was the first to see them, when she stopped, and when Boomer got a look at her, her eyes bulged in shock. "You!" she blurted. "You're—!!!"

Before Boomer got to finish her sentence, both Natal and Newt got in a defensive position when they saw Queen. "Boomer, stand back, y'know!" Newt said, as he glared at the bear.

"What's th' matter?" Whisker uttered, as he glanced at the two standing before them. *And... why does that one chick look like Jill?* he thought.

"Warrior Queen." Natal uttered, just as she drew her katanas. "Escaped...?"

"No, that's not possible!" Newt protested, as he looked at Queen. "They said she had been executed for high treason, y'know! What's she doing here?!"

Queen scoffed, as she looked down at Callous. "Should we take care of them?" she asked.

"Maybe," she said, folding her arms. "Depends if they want to attack us first. They seem to know better than those lowly solders, which let their pride get to their heads."

"You know what?!" For some reason, that comment seemed to tick Boomer off. "Being a soldier isn't about being a damn hero, or being an icon of publicity. Who gives a crap what people should think of you?! Being a solider is a responsibility, where you give your strength to the weak, you lend determination to those who give up too easily, and you give hope to the hopeless!" Boomer then brought up the Vulcan cannon to ready it for fire, forcing her way past Natal and Newt. "More than anything, being a soldier isn't about being a leader, but on the contrary, it's about being a humble servant; a servant to keep the balance of life in check."

"I'm sure that speech was supposed to be very touching," Callous said with a yawn. "But in the end…" she paused, heading for the duck as Boomer unleashed fire on her. But not a bullet hit her, as Callous maneuvered around the line of fire like an acrobat, bouncing off the walls and even diving in and out of the floor. Finally, Boomer stopped shooting, wondering where Callous went since she didn't come out of the floor this time, when something hit her in the back.

Boomer trembled, feeling a pain she had never felt before. It was enough to make her drop the Vulcan cannon, and Callous pulled her hand away from her back, which had been coated with black energy. "…they're just words," she finished.

With that, Boomer collapsed on the ground.

"MA'AM!" As Boomer collapsed, Whisker was quick to rush to her side, cradling her in his arms. "Ma'am! Be ye alright? Say somethin'! Anythin'!"

"Bastard..." While Natal was shocked at this act, she suppressed it, as she glared at Callous. At that moment, she opened her mouth, allowing a long tongue to stretch out of it, letting it grip the handle of her

Nodachi, which she effortlessly pulled out of its scabbard. "You'll pay." Then, with the Nodachi held by her tongue, and katanas in her

hands, she lunged at Callous.

However, in a swift movement, Queen stepped in front of Natal, and before the bullfrog could assess the situation, the bear punched her stomach hard, sending her propelling into a wall. "You're unskilled..." she

uttered.

"Why, you..." Newt growled, as he aimed the Stinger at Queen, and the flamethrower at Callous. "You're gonna wish ya didn't do that, y'know!" he said, as he-

"Newt!" At that point, Wiper suddenly stepped in front of the salamander, glaring at Callous and Queen. "Don't fire. They'll kill you in a heartbeat." he said coldly, before he looked at the ewe. "...you're the one she called Callous, I assume?" he said.

"So, you're still alive... Dawn." Queen uttered, something which Wiper seemed to react to, but not by much. "Callous. We should kill him."

Callous didn't answer Queen at first, as she looked at Wiper. "Yes, I'm Callous," she said. "Quite a courageous quack from that girl; I never knew how much she wanted to be a part of GUN."

Boomer turned her head slowly, and she noticed the large capsule that Queen carried. "No…" she uttered. "…She's been to…the cryolab…"

"Ah, yes," Callous said, as she pulled out the black emerald for them to see. "I got what I came here for."

"You sons of-" Newt began, just as Wiper glanced at him, which made the salamander back down.

"I see..." Wiper hissed, as he cracked his neck. "And I can only guess that you won't give that up without a fight?" Then, he looked back at Whisker. "You! Get her out of here; she needs immediate medical attention! Newt, take Natal, and get them to the sickbay!"

"Y-yeah!" Nodding, Newt ran up to where Natal had been launched

into the wall, before picking her up. "Come on, Whisker; we got to get these guys some help, y'know!"

"A-aye!" Whisker nodded, as he was well on his way to actually tearing up. As Newt and Natal went ahead of them, Whisker picked Boomer up properly, before glancing at Wiper. "Listen, boy! If ye sink t' Davy Jones' locker, I'll pull ye out meself and throw ye back in!

"I won't die." Wiper said, before he looked back at Callous and Queen. "Now go!" With that, Whisker hurried after Newt and Natal, leaving Wiper alone to face the two.

"Wow, some guts you have," Callous said, looking at him with a smirk. Then she looked over at Queen. "Sure, I guess we can kill him," she said, finally answering her earlier question.

"I'd like to see you try, Miss Callous." Wiper said, just as he placed his shotgun on the floor, just as Queen placed the capsule on the floor as well. "Of course, the chance of Dusk killing me, or me killing her, is out of this world."

Queen growled, as she got in a fighting stance. "You talk too much, Dawn." she said, before Wiper got in a fighting stance eerily similar to Queen's. "Let's go!"

"I see you two have some history," Callous said, who didn't even bother getting in a fighter's stance. However, she did bring out her whips, while looking at Wiper. "Yes, let's get things rolling!" she said in agreement with Queen.

Chapter 13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Queen didn't hesitate to suddenly rush at Wiper, thrusting her palm forward in an attempt to strike the snake. However, Wiper was quicker, bending back to avoid the blow, just as he shot his own palm right at Queen's wrist, striking home. "Grr... going for the pressure points, Dawn?"

"Why not, Dusk?" With that comment, Wiper quickly grabbed hold of Queen's arm, before sinking his teeth into them. However, unlike Cal, Queen didn't seem to be affected by the venom being injected into her body, as she grabbed hold of Wiper's body with her free hand, before hurling him towards a wall.

In spite of that, Wiper landed safely on the side of the wall, before looking up at Queen, hissing. "Even after five months..."

"My, my, the intensity," Callous said. She suddenly reached for Wiper with her whip, binding the snake up and bringing him to her. "Actually, I have to admit you're pretty cute," she said with a chuckle.

"How tragic..." Wiper uttered, as he hissed. "...the feeling isn't mutual."

"You sure haven't changed..." Queen growled, as she approached Wiper from behind. "Incapable of feeling anything for anyone but yourself... I'm surprised you even qualified as team leader of Alpha." Then, as she stood behind him, she raised her hands, intending to crush him where he stood. "Now, die!"

However, the moment she brought her fists down, Wiper skillfully leapt over and behind Callous, narrowly evading Queen's attack. Then, before Callous could swing away, he sunk his teeth into her neck. "How does it feel?"

Callous chuckled again, "Kinky." Then she took Wiper and slammed him against the wall. "You'll find that your poison doesn't work on

me," she said, as her hand was beginning to charge up dark energy, poised to strike Wiper in the abdomen.

With a hiss, however, Wiper grabbed hold of the hand charging dark energy. "That's not going to be enough, Miss Callous." he said, just as he began jabbing his fingers into different parts of Callous' body, as if he was stabbing her with his free hand.

"Tsch- Callous, get away from him!" Queen called, as she clenched her fists. "He's trying to disable you! Trying to strike your pressure points!"

"What pressure points?" Wiper would be stopped as Callous gave a high kick to his face, and then she slammed him into another wall. "Don't you get it?" she said. "Technically, I'm not really alive. I'm undead."

Hearing that, Queen blinked. "...undead?"

Wiper grunted, as he quickly kicked Callous in the chest, giving him enough space to get away from her. "Tsch... you're something, alright." He hissed, as he cracked his neck. "If you weren't my enemy, I'd have

recommended you for GUN."

"Sorry, I don't do well with people telling me what to do," Callous said. "I'm just a rebel at heart." Then she took her whips and tried to lash down Wiper with them.

However, Wiper was quicker, as he rolled away from the lashes, before he quickly got to his shotgun. With a hiss, he picked it up. "Alive or not, I doubt that you can fight without your head."

"Have you forgotten someone, Dawn?" Tensing, Wiper narrowly avoided another swing from Queen, just as he rushed towards Callous. Then, as he got close enough, he aimed the weapon at Callous' head, and pulled the trigger.

Just as it would seem the bullet would hit Callous with a bulls-eye, it struck a strange black barrier instead. To this, Callous smirked. "Wiper, did you forget who I was modeled after?" she said. "You

know, little Miss 'Extraordinary?'"

Wiper hissed, before he closed his eyes. "I see... so I can't kill you?" he remarked. "That hardly seems fair, seeing as you could kill me." Then, he opened his eyes. "So, what now? I can keep on evading both you and Dusk until the sun turns blue, so we are at an impasse, I would say."

"I can fix that," Callous said, as her whips shriveled away. Then she held out her hand for something else. At first glance it looked like a long staff, but one tip of the staff grew a long blade, until it was apparent that it was a large scythe. The blade seemed to come out of a black rose, with dark red jewels here and there. It looked like Jill's style of a weapon, but different colors.

Then she took out the black emerald, as it started to glow in a dark light.

Wiper hissed, as he got in a fighting stance. "If that's how it's going to be..."

At that moment, Queen seemed to notice something, as her eyes widened. "...Callous, we should leave. They're sending reinforcements." she said, as she quickly went back to the capsule, picking it up.

Hearing that, Wiper glanced at Queen, before quickly returning his attention to Callous. "Your hearing is still top-notch, Dusk..." he muttered.

Callous grunted, "Hmph. Run if you must Queen, I've got it under control here."

Hearing that, Queen gave out a sigh. "...no, I'll stay with you." She said, before she looked towards Wiper. "If we can kill Dawn here, at least..."

"Will that really solve anything, Dusk?" Wiper said, as he glanced at Queen. "Do you honestly think that my death is going to excuse what you and those others did five months ago?"

"Why don't you just shut up, Dawn." Queen growled. "I was sold out,

and you knew it."

"Well, instead of reminiscing about the good old days, how about we get down to business?" asked Callous, and she went ahead charging at Wiper, swiping at an incredible speed while the blade was coated with Corruption energy, courtesy of the black emerald.

Seeing the blade, Wiper leapt back in order to avoid it; however, a miscalculation on his part led to the blade narrowly creating a small gash in his gut. Once he backed away, he suddenly clutched his stomach in pain, as he collapsed on his knees, gritting his teeth as to not yell out in pain.

"What..." Queen uttered upon seeing this. "...what did you do to him? That's the first time I've ever seen Dawn in pain..."

Callous smirked again. "Wiper, that girl told you about her Purity, right?" she said. "Well, she doesn't know that the opposing force of that energy has a name, and I mind as well tell you what it is. It's called Corruption, and it can happen to anyone, no matter how strong they are in mind, heart, soul and body!" Then she came for another swipe—

"Just shut up lady!"

Something swooped right by, throwing Callous off track as she jumped away from something sharp trying to cut her. As it turned out, it was Charmy, trying to get Callous with his stinger. The old bee landed with his feet on the wall, looking at her. "You're a Rouge-wannabe that talks like a fool!" he said, with a big grin.

"And you're an old geezer that's well over his expiration date," Callous retorted.

"Well lady, which of us is weirder?" When Callous tried to slash at Charmy with her scythe, the bee took off with his wings, buzzing around in random motions each time she tried to swing at him.

While Charmy and Callous fought, Queen couldn't help but feel shocked at seeing something like this. "No way... that's one of the Chaotix..."

"Kkh..." Wiper grunted, as he watched Charmy fight. *Damnit... if I hadn't been so careless...*

As they fought, however, Queen turned her head to the roof, and growled. "Callous, we cannot afford to stay here any longer. They brought more reinforcements than I expected; not even you could hold all of them off."

"Alright already," Callous said impatiently. "Just keep your shirt on." She crossed her arms, and then a swirling storm of dark energy began to build up. "I always hated bugs!" she said.

"Too bad," Charmy said, as he swarmed by Wiper and picked him up. *I should get him out of here before she blows,* he thought.

"You can run for now," Callous said, as the energy started growing much stronger and more violent. "But I said I would go out with a big bang, and that's exactly what I'm going to do!" Then she smirked again. "After all, I already got what I wanted."

"Women," Charmy said, shaking his head. "You never understand them." Then Charmy flew off swiftly, carrying Wiper.

"Kkh..." Wiper grunted, as he gave Callous a final glare, before he closed his eyes, to try and reserve his strength.

"I'm guessing that this big bang will take out the surroundings..." Queen muttered, before she closed her eyes. "I'll wait for you outside." She said, just as she vanished, capsule in tow.

"That would be wise, Queen," said Callous, as her smirk widened like a toad; an evil toad.

The next to happen would be inexplicable, and couldn't be described. All that happened was that when Queen was far enough, Callous let it out, and it broke down the building the more it advanced. It was destructive, almost similar to Shadow's Chaos Blast, but anyone caught in this blast would suffer a more excruciating pain than possible…

It could be seen by any of the GUN soldiers standing outside the

building, as that area crumbled into nothing under its power.

As for Charmy, he managed to fly away fast enough before it reached him, but he couldn't help but look back at the damage that attack caused. Wiper, too, looked at the damage caused, and gritting his teeth, he looked away in shame.

Meanwhile, further away, Newt, Natal, Whisker and Boomer were a safe distance from the explosion, and as they watched the destruction of the base, Natal sank to her knees in despair, whilst Newt closed his eyes, unwilling to witness this further.

And in a different spot, Queen witnessed the destruction of the base, though not with sorrow or joy, but rather indifference. "Thus, our prison is no more..." she uttered, as she looked at the capsule with Shadow in it. "Would you have wanted it to be so?"

Finally, the destruction ended, and the energy died out. Most of all, Callous was nowhere to be seen where she previously was. In fact, in a matter of moments, Callous came up from the ground next to Queen. "So, how was that?" she asked, while casually inspecting her nails.

"An impressive feat." Queen said, as she looked down at Callous. "So, where does fate lead us now?"

Callous then looked at Queen, before holding out her hand to her. "With me," she said. "I'll take us out of here in a blink."

"...very well." Queen said with a nod, as she took hold of Callous' hand with her free hand. "Where to?"

"You'll see soon," said Callous. After she said that, Queen would see that the two of them were sinking back down in the ground.

Charmy finally carried Wiper to the infirmary, seeing the four of them, especially Boomer who was lying on a bed. As the two approached the group, Whisker looked at Charmy. "...what happened? Did ye guys..." he began, before he threw a glance at Newt and Natal, both of them who looked at Wiper with shock.

Charmy didn't respond at first, setting Wiper down on the bed next to Boomer's. Then he noticed the burn mark on his stomach. "Just like Jill…" he muttered, while turning around. "He'll be alright," he said. "But…we lost the black emerald."

"Damn it…" Boomer uttered distastefully. "I shouldn't…have let her take me…down so easily…"

"Don't talk like that..." Wiper coughed, as he glanced at Boomer. "I couldn't stop them... so the blame is... not on your shoulders alone..."

"H-hey, you two, don't strain yourselves, y'know!" Newt said, as he looked at the two of them. "You gotta rest and get your strength back, y'know!"

"He`s right..." Whisker said with a nod. "...both o' ye need t' rest."

Charmy walked over to Boomer, looking at her worriedly. He knew how Boomer was, and that fighting spirit of hers tended to get her hurt a lot.

"What are we going to tell Jill?" Boomer asked. "The way she broke down like that…"

Wiper was silent; the possibility of failure hadn't occurred to him, and thus, he was unsure of how to break the news to Jill.

"I'm bummed..." Newt uttered, as he rubbed his temples. "Poor girl... if only I could've been in her place, y'know! Then she wouldn't haf'ta worry about any of this crap, y'know!"

"Calm down..." Natal said, as she placed a hand on Newt's shoulder.

Charmy set a hand on Boomer, causing her to look at him as the old bee smiled. "I'm sure she already knew this was going to happen," he said. "And now that it did, well...she could take the news a lot better than we think."

"..." Without a word, Wiper sat upright, as he didn't look at Newt and Natal, though they glanced at him.

"...Wiper." Natal said, as she turned to face the snake. "About Queen..."

"...yeah, almost forgot, y'know." Nodding, Newt turned to Wiper as well. "What was up with Queen being there? The commander told us all that she had been executed... but you didn't look surprised when you saw her, y'know."

"...does that have anything to do with the situation at hand?" Wiper asked, as he eyed Newt and Natal. "We can worry about that when we figure out how to retrieve the emerald, before Callous finds some brilliant way to release that Novagod..."

"Knowing Metal, he might not want to do that," Boomer uttered, as she tried to sit up herself, but unlike Wiper, she winced at the pain in her back and collapsed back down again.

"To be frank, I'm more worried about Callous than Metal Sonic at this stage..." Wiper replied, as he glanced at Boomer. "I suppose both of us can safely attest to that fact... Callous is not one we can fight."

Boomer turned away, but she knew he was right.

"As far as we're concerned, it seems like Jill is the only one who really can fight her," Charmy said. "…I never thought we would come to depend so much on her."

"Okay, we get the point," Boomer said, turning her head back to them. "Jill can handle it, but I also think it's going to be a challenge having to explain to the Commander of GUN just what happened. I mean, how in the world did Callous get in there anyhow?"

"I doubt that the Commander would take this well..." Wiper muttered, as he closed his eyes. "She was absolutely certain that nobody could make their way into the cryolab..."

"It's not like she could have dug her way in there, y'know..." Newt said. "The whole place was practically covered in snow and ice! The only way she could've gotten through was if she could phase through walls, but how many can actually do that, y'know?"

Boomer suddenly shot up, "That's it!!!" Then she cringed in pain, lying back down again.

"Boomer, please," Charmy said. "You really must settle down."

"That's what she did," Boomer said. "Not through the walls though; she phased through the *floor!* " Boomer had nearly forgotten that she had done that in the fight.

"But how could she do that?" Whisker pondered, as he scratched his head.

"It has to be those dark powers of hers... Corruption, I think she called it." Wiper muttered, as he scratched his head. "...in any case, the damage has been done. We should head back to HQ as soon as we can."

"First, you two get some rest, at least," Charmy said. "Chaotix HQ isn't going anywhere."

"I'm hooooooome!" cheered Callous, as she and Queen rode in on her motorcycle in Westopolis.

Queen merely looked around the area, without a word.

"Ah, I was wondering when you'd show up," Soon, Metal Sonic flew right up next to them, looking at Callous. *"Did everything go as planned?"*

"And better," Callous replied, taking out the black emerald to show Metal. "I picked up a little hitchhiker too," she said, gesturing to Queen.

"Queen?" Cal came up to them, looking at the bear curiously. "It's been awhile. I didn't think you were alive…"

Queen merely glanced at Cal, before scoffing. "Calculate. I see that you've strayed from a true warrior's path... why does that not surprise me?"

"Now, now, let us stay civil," Metal chuckled, as he looked at the black emerald. *"Now that we have this, we can begin the tests..."*

"Careful with it now," Callous said, handing the emerald to Metal as she dismounted the motorcycle. Then she smirked at Cal. "So, how goes it with those Chaos Emeralds?"

"I got one from Casinopolis," Cal said, bringing out a purple Chaos Emerald to show. "Right now, we have two in our possession, along with that black one you got for us."

"Nice…" Callous chuckled.

Then Cal looked back at Queen. "You know, you should talk Queen," he remarked about what she said earlier. Then he saw the large capsule that was hooked up on Callous' motorcycle. "…What's that?" he asked, pointing at it.

Queen looked back at the capsule, just as she dismounted the motorcycle. "This is a coffin." she said, before she grabbed the capsule, heaving it back over her shoulder. "I brought it out of our prison, so it could be buried."

"And just who is in that coffin of yours?" Metal mused, as he looked at the capsule.

"...Shadow." Queen replied bluntly.

"Really now?" Cal asked in some surprise. "So he was in the cryolab?"

Callous chuckled as she glanced over at the capsule that Queen carried. "He was probably so precious to GUN that they wanted to preserve more than just a memory of him," she said. "But I suppose Queen here didn't see that an icy grave would fit such a legend."

"You found a way into the cryolab?" Cal asked Callous in disbelief.

Callous laughed, while smiling devilishly at Cal. "You're so cute when you play dumb," she said. "It was easy getting in there, but it was so much more fun getting back out."

"I could only imagine," Metal chuckled, before he glanced at the capsule. *"But the body of Shadow... I wonder if Chaos Energy still remains within his body."*

"If you want to experiment with him, do not bother." Queen said with a growl, as she looked down at Metal. "His body shall become one with the earth, as it was meant to be."

"Oh, I didn't think about experimenting with him. What data he had, I already possess, my dear Queen," Metal said with another chuckle. *"Well, let's not waste any time; I finished upgrading one of the androids, and if it holds its own, I can repeat the process with the rest."*

"So, I'm guessing another round with that gang of kids?" Callous guessed.

"Indeed." Metal said with a nod. *"But I won't send anything out, until we find out whether or not the androids will be overtaken by the Corruption ."* he added, just as he looked at the black emerald. *"Now, how to extract some of that power, without doing anything foolish..."*

Cal observed the black emerald as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "Hm…" Then he walked up to Metal. "We can use a machine to draw out its energy like any other Chaos Emerald. Perhaps your mentor, Dr. Eggman, had such a machine?" Then Cal gave a questionable look at Callous. "That is, if that is a safe way."

"Oh, that's the safest you're going to get," Callous replied. "As long as there isn't physical contact with that emerald when you use its power, then it won't do any harm to you."

"Hmm..." Metal hummed, before he nodded. *"Yes... I do believe Eggman had something like that. Let us begin; the quicker this test can go by, the better."* Then, he suddenly took to the skies, headed towards a larger building. *"Calculate, why don't you show the ladies the way to the lab? I'll get everything set up."*

As Metal flew off, Queen looked away from the city, and towards the

fields. "...he should be buried in the wilderness. We should allow his body to rest in peace, now."

Cal nodded to Queen. "You can go ahead and bury him if you want, Queen; we'll wait for you."

Callous suddenly put her arms around Cal, eying him with interest. "Yeah, we'll wait for you," she chuckled in a way that seemed to make Cal turn red in the face.

Queen glanced briefly at Callous and Cal, before she nodded. "I will not take long." she said, before she ran out of the city, quickly rushing out of sight.

"Callous," Cal said, looking at her nervously. "You…do realize that a good portion of my body is cybernetic, right?"

Callous chuckled. "Wow, you're sure jumping to conclusions, aren't you?"

Cal turned even redder. "That's not…I didn't mean…uh…"

Callous laughed at his stumbling response, with a finger on his chest. "Where there's a will, there's a way," she whispered.

It was nearly the middle of the night when Charmy called into Chaotix HQ, informing Tails of what happened. *"It looks like Boomer has to stay overnight here in the infirmary,"* the bee said over the phone. *"And I'm going to have to stay with her."*

"I see..." Tails responded, as he sighed. "Poor girl... what about Team Alpha and Whisker? Will they stay as well?"

" *Whisker will likely stay here with Boomer as well,"* Charmy said. *"As for Team Alpha, it's up to them. They may very well come back in the morning or so; depending on how the Commander feels when they tell her what happened."* There was a small pause, and then, *"…Tails, how is Jill doing? They feel uneasy about having to tell her the news."*

"...she's trying to take her mind off things. The kids are playing with her, and..." Tails responded, before he sighed. "To think that these things would come back to haunt her..."

" *We all have things in our past that come to haunt us,"* Charmy said. *"Anyhow, it's late, so I think I'll let you go. It's your decision if you want to tell her yourself, or if you want us to tell her when we come back sometime tomorrow."*

"I see... we'll wait until you come back. Take care of yourselves." Tails responded, before the line went dead.

"Was that the Captain?" asked a voice behind Tails, and if he turned, he'd see Brick.

"...yes." Tails replied, as he turned to face Brick. "He and the others hit a snag, so they'll be home a bit later than expected."

Brick didn't respond to that, except with a nod. "I see," he said finally. "…I'm going to go ahead and guess that they couldn't stop that Callous woman."

"..." Tails didn't reply, as he sat down on a chair. "...I would be grateful if you didn't tell Jill about it, Brick. Not yet."

"Don't worry," Brick said, sitting down with him in another chair. "I know not to tell her." He leaned back in the chair with folded arms, looking at the ground in despair. "I'm just…really worried."

"To tell you the truth, so am I, Brick." Tails sighed. "That woman is one to be feared... she took down Boomer in one shot, and Wiper hardly scratched her... it seems like she's turning into a bigger threat than

even Metal at this point."

"…is Brownie really the only one that will be able to fight her?" Brick asked. "I mean, what if Callous plans to release that vampire that's locked away inside that thing?"

"I suppose that Jill is the only one with the proper power to face Callous. Unless there's someone else who can manipulate Purity..."

Tails muttered. "...I have no idea what we're going to do if she is trying to release the vampire. It's likely that Jill still hasn't overcome her trauma, and would end up..."

"No." Brick put the chair down and stood up. "It's not going to go like that, I know," he said. "Brownie's stronger than we think, and I have a feeling that maybe she'll pull through when things come to worse…" Brick still didn't look sure though, and he slammed his fists on the table. "I'm gonna make them pay for causing a life full of hell for her! She didn't deserve anything that happened to her!"

"...no, she didn't." Tails said, as he stood up, placing a hand on Brick's shoulder. "But don't lose yourself to anger, Brick. That's not going to help Jillian one bit, you know."

Brick just looked at Tails, until he eventually sighed while sitting back down in his chair. "What do I do Professor?" he asked in despair. "I want to help her, somehow…but it's starting to look like I'd only get in the way."

Tails looked down at Brick, before sighing. "I can't answer that question for you, Brick." he said. "That's something you have to find out on your own."

Brick looked down at the floor again silently for awhile. Then finally, he got back up. "It's getting late," he said. "I should probably tell the little guys its bedtime."

"Maybe so..." Tails replied, before he looked towards the window. "I'll see if Team Alpha comes back earlier than expected."

"Don't stay up too late, Professor," Brick said, as he headed down the hall. Then when he was sure he was near the group, he called out. "Guys! Where are you?" Though he didn't get any replies, he would begin to hear some harmonica music in one of the rooms. "Hm?" When he heard it, Brick started to follow where the song came from. When he reached where it was the loudest, he opened the door a crack and peeked in.

Just as he did that, the music stopped, and he would see the kids, along with Jill, watching Jack take a few breaths, before looking at

the group. "Okay, does anyone else have any more requests?" he asked with a smile.

Striker raised his hand eagerly. "Ooo! Ooo! I've got one! Play that one happy song you're always playing!"

Brick didn't move from where he was, but he smiled seeing a heartwarming sight like this. He didn't want to interrupt it.

"Ooh, that's my favorite!" Jack laughed, before he quickly wiped the harmonica clean. "Okay, here goes!" Then, he began playing the harmonica in a very cheerful manner, just as he usually played it.

This song made everyone smile. Jill chuckled while thinking, *funny how it doesn't have a name.*

Brick had to admit he was impressed how good Jack was with a harmonica, and he couldn't help but wonder where a guy like him got skills like those. Anyhow, he waited until Jack finally finished playing his song, and all the kids cheered and applauded it. Then he opened the door and came in. "Alright guys, it's time for bed," he said.

"Aw!" all the kids groaned, and to this, Jill giggled.

"But we're not tired Brick!" moaned Ani. Ironically enough, she yawned right after she said that, and Brick raised an eyebrow at her.

"What about Boomer?" Rudy asked. "Isn't she coming back tonight?"

"Yeah, and Captain Whisker too," Striker added.

"Well, they won't be able to come home tonight," Brick said. "But I promise they'll come back tomorrow."

"How come they're not coming back tonight?" Milo asked worriedly.

"Because…uh…" At first, Brick's mind was a blank, but luckily he came up with an excuse. "Because they're having a sleep over there!" Sure, that'll tide the kids over, but he wondered what he'd say to Jill if she asked about it.

"A sleepover?" Jack repeated with a surprised look. "Aaw, they're lucky... we got to have a sleepover sometime someplace, right, guys?"

"Well, technically, you guys *are* having a sleep over," Jill said, which made the kids look at her curiously. "You're having the sleep over here!"

"Hey, she's right!" said Rudy, hopping up and down.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot!" Jack said, before he laughed. "But we haven't had a sleepover party yet! Let's have one tomorrow, alright?"

"Yeah, tomorrow, when you've guys had some sleep," Brick said. "Who knows? A sleep over party might be more fun when Whisker, Boomer and the others get back."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Striker said, getting up as he stretched. Then the kids started heading for the door.

"Yeah..." Jack said with a nod, but just before he headed out the door, he gave Jill and Brick a wave. "Good night, you two. Don't stay up too late!" he said before he left.

Ani was the last one out, shutting the door behind her, though she accidentally left it open a small crack. Then she suddenly stopped, as she started to hear something.

"Brick?"

"Yeah?"

"What's the matter? You seem so glum…"

Ani pressed an ear to the door hearing this.

"Yeah, I guess I've been a little down in the dumps lately."

"It's not me, is it?"

"N-no! Brownie, what makes you think that?"

"Hey guys," whispered Ani, motioning for them to come back, "Brick and Jill are talking to each other…"

"Ani, I'm not sure we should be listening," Milo said, but that didn't convince the husky to step away from the door. Soon, Rudy and Striker huddled by the door too, peeking in through the crack at Brick and Jill. To this, Milo sighed, as he gathered at the door too.

"Because Brick," Jill said. "Ever since you saved me in the jungle, you've always felt responsible to take care of me when something happens. Whenever I have an emotional break-down, it puts weight on your shoulders and you stress out when I'm not around." Jill looked down at the ground in shame. "I feel guilty what it does to you," she said.

"Brownie, I don't take care of you because I feel obliged to," Brick said. "I take care of you because I really want to, and I care about you, and…" Brick stopped himself. He had almost let it out too quickly.

"Hn?" Intrigued by this, Jack huddled by the kids, as he listened in as well.

Jill noticed how silent Brick was all of a sudden, and she looked at him in some astonishment. She almost had a feeling where this was going. "Brick?" she said.

Brick looked deeply at her, and he took her bandaged hand gently. "All I want to do is make you happy," he said, as he smiled. "I like to see you smile."

"Egh, mushy stuff," groaned Striker.

"Hold on, this is interesting," Milo said.

Jill suddenly smiled; very sweetly too. All the kids would notice it to be a kind of smile they've never seen Jill with before, and most of them were bewildered by it.

Jack blinked, as he tried to get a better view of what happened.

"But Brick…" Jill said. "…I wish there was a way that I could make

you happy too."

Brick stepped closer to her. "Brownie," he said. "You already make me happy." When he said that, Jill's heart rate increased, as well as his own, and they stared at each other with a look that was alien to the children. Then they started moving even closer.

However, Jack trying to see better caused to shove some of the kids, and poor, unfortunate Milo ended up tripping forward. "Wah-whoa!!" he gasped, and that somehow knocked all the other children off balance as well…

So before Brick and Jill could actually do anything, the door burst open thanks to the children piling onto the ground, causing the older two to jump away from each other in surprise.

Shoot! Jack thought, as he quickly looked around, before laughing nervously. "Erm, we were just, eh, playing tag in the halls!" he said, before he quickly got hold of the other kids, trying to push them out the

door. "We'll go to bed now!"

Both Brick and Jill just stood there, silent with embarrassment as the kids were shoved down the hall by Jack.

"Aw, I wanted to see if they'd actually kiss," Ani groaned. "If they did, Brick would never hear the end of it!"

"Ani, I don't think you need to be in any more trouble with Brick," Milo said.

"Oh, I shouldn't have tried seeing things better..." Jack said with a sigh. "We have to find some way to make it up to them!"

"We can probably make it up to them by leaving them alone and letting them finish what they started," Striker said. "C'mon, let's go to bed…"

When they left, Brick and Jill exchanged a glance, and then they both let out a deep breath. "Well, that was… awkward," Jill said.

Brick chuckled nervously, "Yeah…you know those crazy kids."

Both Brick and Jill shared that nervous chuckle to themselves, and then they looked at each other again, smiling.

"We should probably go to bed too," Jill said.

"Yeah," Brick said. But neither of them moved from where they were. In fact, after awhile, they came closer and hugged. "Brownie," he said. "I was worried that with all the bad things happening, I wouldn't get the chance to finally tell you how I feel."

Jill held Brick tighter. "And I was worried that we'd lose each other." Jill then looked at Brick. "Because…I think I feel the same way about you." Hearing that, Brick finally couldn't hold it. He came forward and kissed her, and though this sudden act shocked her, Jill melted into it, getting lost in a passionate make-out.

Chapter 14

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"...and that is what happened." Right now, Wiper was speaking on a phone, likely to the GUN Commander. "I am sorry... not only did we lose the black emerald, but D- Queen managed to escape from her prison, and the base is pretty much ruined. I assume full responsibility."

"Full responsibility, my ass." the commander replied in a harsh tone. *"You did what you could, Agent Wiper, and so did the others you brought along. Do not beat yourself up over this, do you hear?"*

Wiper blinked, before he nodded. "...I won't. But I don't want you to start sulking when we cut the line."

"...clever, aren'tcha?" the commander chuckled. *"I'll be fine. Just recover, and get back to protecting Jillian. Over and out."* Then, the line went dead.

"...well, that went well." Wiper uttered with a small smile, as he placed the phone away.

"So, she took it well?" Charmy asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Better than I had expected." Wiper uttered, as he leant his head against a wall. "She was a bit distraught by the fact that we lost a great deal to Callous, despite her reassurance that no one could penetrate the cryolab..." As he spoke, he looked towards one part of the room, where Whisker, Newt and Natal all were sleeping soundly. "...but what's done is done. Both she and I know that. Therefore, we have to move forward."

"Well, that's all fine and dandy," Boomer said. "But now we have to plan what we're going to do about all this. Metal Sonic's got an army of Shadow androids, Callous is planning to do who knows what with that emerald, and—!"

"Boomer, you just can't settle down for once, can you?" chuckled Charmy.

"At the moment, we can't exactly find a way to beat either Callous or Metal Sonic." Wiper noted, as he threw a glance at Boomer. "For now, I would suggest that we collect the Chaos Emeralds. We'll likely need every ounce of assistance we can if we're to beat these people."

Boomer grunted as she turned away, "Hmph…I guess you're right about that." Then Boomer stood up where she was, with a bit of a struggle from her wounded back. "Captain, I want to get back to Chaotix HQ," she said.

"Are you sure about that Boomer?" Charmy asked.

"Sooner or later, we have to tell Jill," she said. "And despite how upset she'll be, she's the only one right now that stands a chance of stopping either of them." Boomer then sighed. "I know it's not fair to ask so much of Jill, especially when her hand…"

"Yes, that has yet to recover..." After saying that, Wiper sighed. "Very well, who should wake the others?"

"Allow me," Boomer said, as a big grin crossed her bill. Then she walked over to the three of them, inhaled and…

" *HEY! RISE AND SHINE!"*

That produced the desired effect. "WAAGH!!" each of them yelped, even Whisker. "WAKE TH' SWABBIES, AN'..." the robot uttered, before shaking his head, "ugh... how early in th' mornin' be 't?"

"Kkh... too early for my liking, y'know." Newt grunted, as he rubbed his head.

Snarling, Natal shot a glare up at Boomer, before she got up. "Unnecessary." she muttered, before Newt and Whisker got up.

"Now that all of you are up and running..." Wiper began, as he stood up as well. "...we can leave for the Chaotix HQ."

Boomer tried to suppress her snickering.

"Are they back yet?! Are they back yet?!" Rudy asked excitedly, rushing through the halls.

After passing by Tails one too many times, the old fox couldn't help but chuckle, before standing in Rudy's way. "I'm afraid you're going to have to wait a bit longer, little Rudy." he chuckled.

"Aw, but I wanna see the Captain, and Boomer, and Whisker!" Rudy said.

"Yeah, what're we going to do until they get here?" Ani asked, walking into the room.

"Maybe you can go outside, or something along those lines?" Tails suggested with a mild shrug. "Who knows, maybe you'll see them coming."

"Hey, yeah!" Rudy said. "Maybe we can go wake up Jill and Brick and see if they wanna play too!"

"I already tried their door," Striker said, coming into the room as well. "It's locked."

"It's…locked?" Ani questioned.

"Really, now?" Tails mused, as he closed his eyes. "Well, if it's locked, there must be a good reason for that. Maybe you should let Brick and Jill sit this one out." he said. "Why don't you wake up Jack? He seems to still be asleep, from what I've gathered."

"Okay!" The three of them said, as they left the room to do just that.

Tails watched the trio run off with a smile, before he looked out the window. "...but I do wonder what Jill and Brick have been..." he muttered.

When the trio got to Jack's bedroom, they'd find that he was fast asleep, with his pillow covering his face. Rarely did one see Jack

snooze like that, as he was often playing with the other kids at this time of day.

"One," Ani said, taking a step forward.

"Two," Striker said, taking a step as well.

"THREE!" Rudy decided to forgo the whole thing with a flying leap, as he landed on the bed and started jumping on it. "Wake up Jack!" he said. Then the rest of them started jumping on the bed, laughing.

Surprisingly enough, instead of waking him with a jump-start, as one would expect, Jack simply blinked, before he slowly removed the pillow from his head, as he noticed Ani, Rudy and Striker bouncing on the bed. "...hiya, guys..." he yawned, as he stretched his arms out. "What time is it...?"

"It's time to get up and play!" said Rudy. "If we play outside, we might see Whisker and Boomer and the Captain come home!"

"...we might...?" Jack uttered drowsily, before he suddenly bounced right off the bed, landing perfectly on the floor. "Then let's go! I bet they took care of that sleepover with no problem!"

"C'mon!" exclaimed Ani, as they charged out of the bedroom.

"Alright!" Jack laughed, as he was about to run after them, when he stopped. "Hn?" Blinking, he looked towards the window, and as he squinted, he swore that he could see something in the distant horizon. "...maybe that's them?" he shrugged, before he ran after Ani, Striker and Rudy.

Meanwhile…

Brick didn't open his eyes just yet, but he let out a small yawn while he stretched. Then he put his arms around her as he smiled. "Morning already?" he asked.

"Looks like it," Jill murmured, as she slowly opened her eyes. "I think it was a smart thing locking that door this time."

Brick chuckled while he opened his eyes a tad and looked at her.

"Yeah, I think we'd have a hard time explaining this one." Jill giggled when he kissed her on the forehead, and then she nuzzled up to him warmly. "Ani would never let me hear the end of it," Brick added with a sigh.

Personally, Jill was a bit surprised. She had known Brick for awhile, yes, but all of their feelings just sort of spilled out all at once. She never expected this, and truthfully, neither did Brick. But it didn't matter much other than that they were happy, and it felt right.

"Well," Brick said, "we should probably get up, before they get worried and send reinforcements to break the door down."

Jill chuckled. "Who do you think they'd send?"

Brick sat up from the bed. "I'm not waiting to find out," he said.

After a few minutes, the door unlocked and opened. Jill stepped out first, fully dressed, and she looked back and forth between the halls as Brick came out of the room and closed the door behind him. "Wow, it's surprisingly quiet. Wonder where they all went."

"Maybe they went to play outside," Jill said, as the two of them walked down the hall together. As they walked, Jill couldn't help but look at Brick, who smiled at her. She smiled back. Then they came into the room that Tails was in, and when she saw him, she jumped a little. "Oh, Professor, hi!" she said.

"Professor, did you even get any sleep?" Brick asked.

Tails glanced in their direction, before smiling. "Of course I did, Brick." he said. "But what about you two? Rudy, Ani and Striker told me that your door was locked."

"Yeah, we slept alright," Brick answered with a big smile.

"Really..." With a nod, Tails looked out the window. "The kids went to wake up Jack before they went outside. If I'm not mistaken, they're eagerly awaiting Charmy, Boomer, Whisker and Team Alpha's return. Maybe you could go outside with them?"

"Sure," Jill said, and then she looked at Brick. "C'mon Brick."

"Yeah," Brick said with a nod, following Jill.

As he watched them leave, Tails couldn't help but smile a bit, before he looked out the window, just as he noticed something in the horizon. "...is that them already?" he uttered, as he squinted. "No, wait... that's just one..."

Once Jill and Brick stepped outside, they saw the three kids, along with the figure in the distance that was approaching. "Hey, who's that?" Jill asked the three of them.

"Don't know," Striker answered. "We thought it was them at first, but it's only one person…"

"Yeah, it was really weird..." Jack chimed in, as he scratched his head, looking at Jill and Brick. "I saw that guy coming from my bedroom window, but I thought it was the others... do you guys know him?"

As the figure got closer and closer, eventually, Jill would be able to see just what the figure was, and as it turned out, it was quite the familiar sight.

Recognizing it immediately, Jill's smile faded and turned into a serious look. The next thing that happened was that she held out her hand, and her holy blade appeared in her grip. This shocked them a great deal.

"Brownie?!" Brick said, watching Jill running off towards the figure.

"Not another one…" she uttered, rushing towards it.

"Jill?" Jack blinked, as he looked towards the figure again. "Hang on... guys, doesn't that guy look familiar?"

When Jill began rushing at the figure, it stopped, before it began cracking its knuckles, without a word spoken.

That was enough to allow Jill to launch the first attack, immediately swinging her blade to send out waves of slash-like energy at the figure.

"Holy cow!" exclaimed Striker, seeing this.

However, with a grunt, the figure suddenly pushed his hands forward, a barrier bouncing the slashing waves away from him. At that point, it became apparent just what this figure was; another Shadow Android. Then, he suddenly vanished from where he stood, reappearing right in front of Jill, just as he threw a punch powered by Chaos Energy right at her gut.

Jill couldn't grab his punch since her other hand was bandaged, so she took the punch through clenched teeth, just as she directed a kick to his face. The kick connected, but it wasn't enough to make the android fully stagger away, just as it aimed a Chaos-powered projectile at Jill. She swats the projectile away with her sword, as she attempts to physically cut at the Shadow Android.

However, as she swung her sword, the android effortlessly grabbed hold of the blade, as his hands were enveloped in Chaos Energy. At that moment, he grabbed hold of Jill's bandaged hand, just as something strange happened with the Chaos Energy; it turned from a slightly red color into a dark color, and as his grip tightened, Jill would feel something incredibly painful sear through her.

Jill's eyes widened, realizing just what it was. The pain was so great that she cried out in agony.

"Brownie!!!" Brick cried frantically, hearing her cry out like that.

C'mon Jill! Pull it together, girl!

Jill gritted her teeth. Energy started building up around her, and it was growing rapidly stronger until it burst which would likely force back the Shadow Android as well as deal damage, because it was Purity energy.

Indeed, the blow pushed the android back, but while pieces of its body were torn off, it remained standing, just as its entire body became coated in that dark Chaos Energy. Then, just as its eyes began shifting from the usual white to a darker color, it began hurling Chaos projectiles relentlessly at Jill.

"How?!" Jill gasped, doing her best to dodge all of the projectiles that the Shadow android threw. "HOW DID YOU GET THAT POWER?!?!" She slipped, and one of the projectiles scratched her cheek, causing her to yelp as it left that burn mark on her. With that, she threw aside her sword as her free hand gave off green Purity energy, and then she started to lash forward at the Shadow android.

"Guys, get the Professor!" Brick told the kids, just as he caught a glimpse of who the mysterious figure was.

"A-alright!" Jack said with a nod, before he looked at the other kids. "C'mon, let's go!" he said, before he rushed back inside.

Instead of trying to dodge, however, the android stopped firing projectiles, just as the aura around him was focused into his hand, before he rushed at Jill as well, throwing his fist so that the two energies would collide with one another.

As the two forces barricaded each other, Jill concentrated on building a wall of Purity energy around her to raise the chances of protecting herself. "She's working for Metal, isn't she?" Jill asked the android. "Callous?"

"...she is." the android finally said, just as the dark energy began intensifying around him. "Her cooperation, along with my master's upgrades, should serve to be your bane." Then, the android began pushing forward, the darkness attempting to penetrate the Purity barrier. But as Jill quickly would notice, something was off, as slowly, from the android's feet, the darkness began engulfing its body.

Jill noticed this happening. *I knew it,* she thought. *It's starting to consume it…* She was starting to gain some confidence, and that was good. Even if the opposing force was hard to stand against, her barrier managed to hold thanks to her calming down.

Brick wasn't sure what to do. He knew he couldn't break Jill's concentration right now, but he really worried for her safety.

Though the darkness slowly engulfed the android, it didn't let up one bit, as it continued to apply pressure in its attempt to destroy the

barrier. "Do you think you can keep this up?" the android eventually uttered, just as the darkness nearly engulfed all of it. "You may have lucked out today... but this is not the end of it."

At that point, its eyes gave out a red glow. " *Self-destruction initiated.* " Just then, the darkness fully engulfed the android, and in that instant, it exploded, sending a wave of flame mixed with the darkness emerging all around it.

"Brownie! NO!" Brick screamed, seeing that she was engulfed in the explosion. It was then that the kids had pulled the Professor out, but they stopped when they saw what happened in shock.

"JILL!!!" Jack yelled as he saw the massive explosion, and if not for the kids restraining him, he would very nearly have run in there in an attempt to save her.

Tails was utterly speechless upon seeing this, as he sunk down to his knees. *...Jill...*

The cloud cleared, revealing bits of the field burning along with some of the scrap metal that was from the former Shadow Android. Jill was finally seen, and thankfully, she was still standing, but she looked exhausted. The Purity barrier eventually deteriorated, and the first sign of her stumbling caused Brick to dash after her. When he caught her, he saw that Jill was completely covered in burn marks, and she looked like she was in horrible pain.

"Brownie, are you okay?!" Brick asked frantically.

Jill didn't answer. She was in too much pain.

Tails gritted his teeth, before he looked at Jack and the kids. "Listen, you have to ready a bed for Jill! Find Cream and have her help with first-aid when we get Jill inside! Quickly!"

"O-okay, Professor!" Jack said, before he got the kids in just as quickly as they had gotten outside.

Quickly scrambling to his feet, Tails rushed to Jill's side, and together with Brick, attempted to get Jill on her feet. "I saw the battle from inside... to think that Metal Sonic could have done that with the

Shadow Androids..." he muttered, as he looked away from the bull.

"Callous," Jill muttered weakly. "…She's working for him…"

"Brownie, don't talk," Brick said, as he and Tails helped Jill limp inside.

" *...it failed.* " Back in Westopolis, Metal sat by a computer, his arms folded, and his eyes closed, as Cal, Callous and Queen stood behind him. " *Good thing that I installed the Shadow Androids with a self-destruction sequence I can activate instantly. Judging from the field test, simply implanting Corruption into a machine will lead to it eventually being consumed by that energy.* "

"Well, of course," Callous said. "Corruption is like an aggressive animal. You try to control it, and it will turn into a power struggle until Corruption completely consumes you. You have to allow the power to be dominant in order to work with it."

"That…is a strange way of putting it," commented Cal, looking at her awkwardly.

"It did manage to harm her a great deal though," Callous said with a chuckle. "I can feel her pain…"

" *Well, it's going to take more tests until I can use it reliably.* Metal sighed, as he opened his eyes. " *I won't have my reign crumble because of an oversight only my creator could have made.* "

"But how could a machine allow that kind of power dominance, even if only to persevere?" Queen mused, as she looked down at Callous.

Callous sat down, and she closed her eyes, not responding to Queen.

"Callous?" Cal said, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know," she finally said. "I don't know machines well."

"I see..." Queen muttered.

" *Well, no sense in getting hung up on that.* " Metal chimed in, before he turned to face Callous. " *Say, I've been thinking... Purity and Corruption are complete opposite forces, and only the one can conquer the other, and vice versa. But what would happen if both of them are in sync; in harmony, one could say?* "

"Hm," Callous thought about it some more.

"It seems as far as you've told us, Callous," Cal added, "Corruption affects the mind, body and soul, but mostly the mind. At first, I thought that we should increase the AI in the androids, since that might be a way to increase their chances of using it, but that would result in a possible mutiny if they got too smart."

"So with something to counteract the Corruption if it gets out of line," Callous finished, as a grin slowly grew on her face. "Then they could have a chance to use it wisely; and an added bonus would be that they could protect themselves against the girl if she tried to use her Purity on them."

" *Perhaps we should try it out?* " Metal inquired. " *It would be amusing to see the results of that test, to say the least.* "

"But wouldn't you need a sample of this Purity, in order for that to work?" Queen said, as she leant against a nearby wall.

" *Ah, yes... I do have a copy of her data, back when we first fought.* " Metal said. " *Though whether or not that is enough to replicate Purity, I don't know.* "

"It's not going to be enough," Callous said, standing back up. "In which case, I know the solution to that problem…" and her grin grew quite mischievous.

"You mean…kidnap her?" Cal supposed in surprised.

"Exactly," Callous said. "And not only that, but with her in captivity, we'll get a chance to test out the Shadow androids on her."

" *That does sound tempting...* " Metal mused, before he shook his head. " *But if we can simply kidnap her, why even bother applying Corruption to the androids in the first place? And what would stop us*

from just killing her there and then? "

"Would it not be easier *if* you just had her killed?" Queen asked with a raised eyebrow.

" *Indeed... but that wouldn't be fair, would it?* " Metal replied in a somewhat cynical tone, before he turned away again. " *The reason I'm bothering with this Corruption business in the first place, is so she can't use her Purity to dispel the Chaos Emeralds once I have them in my possession. Speaking of, Calculate, have you tracked down the signals of another emerald yet?* "

"Yes," Cal said. "It seems GUN possesses one…and apparently, Callous forgot to get it."

"Hey, wasn't my fault," Callous said with a point at Cal. "I lost track. I was having too much fun."

"With their forces weakened, thanks to her, however," Cal said, turning back to Metal. "We might be able to get it no problem."

" *Only that one...* " Metal mused, before throwing a glance at Queen. " *Why don't we let our new comrade get it for us?* "

Hearing that, Queen glanced curiously at Metal. "You would want me to fetch it?" she said.

" *Why not? From what I've heard, you and GUN aren't on the best terms. I would be thrilled to see how they fare against you.* "

Queen blinked, before she held her hand against her chin in thought. "...getting proper vengeance for my imprisonment would be a relief..."

"Why not?" Callous said. "I can use a break anyway."

After some pondering, Queen eventually nodded. "Very well. I'll see to it that the Chaos Emerald is brought here."

" *Excellent.* " Metal chuckled. " *I assume that you will need transport to get back to the base?* "

"No." Queen responded, as she cracked her neck. "I'll deal with it on my own. When would you have me leave?"

"Whenever you feel like you're ready to leave," Callous said. "We may be on a schedule, but I would say we're pretty flexible after what that android did to the girl."

Queen nodded, as she began walking out of the room. "It'd be better if I got it before they rebuilt their defenses. I'll be back around tomorrow." she said, before she vanished.

" *...so, what do you two make of her?* " Metal inquired, as he glanced at Callous and Cal. " *Do you think that we can trust her?* "

"To be honest, I could care less," Callous said with a shrug. "I'm not really worried about her."

"I guess I'm not concerned about her either," Cal added. "She was presumed dead by many, and GUN doesn't like her…I'm still not sure. I never knew her that well."

" *Hm, too bad.* " Metal shrugged, before he turned back to the computer. " *Well, we have work to do, I suppose.* "

"Right," They both said.

It had taken them a while, but now, Team Alpha, Boomer, Charmy and Whisker could finally see the HQ coming up to them. "Finally." Natal sighed, as she looked at the others.

"I just hope that she won't take it too hard, y'know..." Newt muttered, as he looked down at Wiper, who had remained silent for quite some time.

"Oi..." Whisker chimed in, as he zoomed further ahead. "...dasn't 't look like thar has been an explosion ou' thar?" he said, noting the burn marks from an earlier confrontation.

When Boomer noticed them too, she rushed on over to the very spot where the burnt field was. While observing around, she noticed

pieces of scrap metal too. "Someone was fighting something here," she said, "and it looks to me that it self-destructed…"

"Someone was fighting something…" Charmy, putting the pieces together, grew extremely worried. He suddenly dashed toward the HQ frantically. "Tails!!!"

"Captain!" Boomer blurted in surprise, running off after him.

But Charmy didn't stop. He entered inside and hurried through the halls. *Please be alright,* he thought.

As Charmy ran through the halls, eventually, he bumped right into Tails, sending both of them tumbling to the floor. "Ow..." he groaned, just as he noticed the bee. "Oh, Charmy, you're back." he said, just as he got back on his feet. "The others are outside, I reckon?"

Charmy rubbed his aching noggin, and let out a sigh of relief seeing that his old friend was alright. "Yeah, the rest are coming in," He said, getting onto his own feet. "But we saw a burnt spot of land out there and Boomer said—"

"—that you guys fought off something that self-destructed," finished Boomer herself, coming around the hall. "What went on here when we were gone, Professor?"

As the others approached them as well, Tails let out a sigh. "...it was another Shadow Android." Tails said, as he closed his eyes. "Jill took it on, but she was... caught in the explosion when it self-destructed."

Wiper's eyes widened when he heard that. "No... she's not-"

"Don't worry; she's alive." Tails shot in before they could get the wrong idea. "But she's currently being treated by Cream and some of the kids, so we can't disturb her just yet..."

Charmy nodded. It was unfortunate to hear that Jill was hurt, but in truth, he was thankful that she had kept everyone else safe. Boomer, on the other hand, was outraged.

"That sneaky little…" she growled. "I can't believe Metal Sonic did

that!"

"It sounds to me like he must have known Jill would be on her own," Charmy said, finding it suspicious.

"Crafty..." Natal muttered, as she rubbed her chin in thought.

"Ugh, what are we supposed to do now?" Newt grumbled, as he folded his arms. "We can't leave the place, or those androids'll tear the place to shreds if they get the chance!"

"I don't think Metal would be that relentless..." Tails muttered, as he glanced at Boomer. "In any case, we should start thinking about how to deal with the Chaos Emeralds. If we all stay here to protect the others, Metal can seize them for himself, but if too many of those ready for battle leave, we risk the safety of the others."

"What about Jill?" Boomer asked. "Now that she's down for the count, how do we expect to do anything around here?!"

"Boomer, don't be so simple-minded," Charmy said, turning to her. "All of us have ways to help out. After all, it seems like you've healed up nicely."

That shut her up.

Wiper nodded, before he walked away from the group. "If you'll excuse me, I need to discuss something with the GUN Commander. Maybe she has some intel where we can find the emeralds."

"Hey, Wiper! Maybe you can ask her about what the hell Queen was doin' back at the base!" Newt called after him, though Wiper didn't answer to that. "...tsch, something's fishy, y'know."

Tails raised an eyebrow, as he looked at Team Alpha. "Queen?"

"Yeah, apparently Queen was locked up in the cryolab, instead of being dead like everyone was made out to believe," Boomer explained. "Callous set her free when she got a hold of the emerald and…Queen was carrying another capsule."

"Strange..." Tails mused, as he scratched his chin. "What else could

have been in there that she'd..."

"Shadow." Natal suddenly said, as her eyes widened.

Hearing that, Newt looked down at the bullfrog. "What? You're seriously saying that Queen got Shadow's body?!" he uttered in disbelief.

"Hey, I dasn't want t' interrupt or anythin'..." Whisker shot in, as he scratched his head. "...but jus' who be this Queen ye`re talkin' about?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story..." Newt said, as he looked at where Wiper had left. "...but the one we got was bogus. Wiper should be able to tell you more, y'know."

Boomer didn't understand why Queen would have Shadow's body. She met her once or twice, along with Cal and Rudy, but she didn't really know her well. She decided not to ask anymore.

Just then, Cream came walking up to them. "Oh good, you're back," she said to the following that just arrived. "I'm sure Tails told you what happened. Jill is taken care of now and resting. You can see her if you need to."

"Thank you." Tails said with a nod to Cream, before he glanced at the group. "Won't you go see her, now?"

"Well..." Newt began, as he scratched his neck. "...we two can wait, y'know. Boomer, you go check on her, y'hear?"

Meanwhile, outside of the HQ, Wiper sat with his back against his wall, his finger pressed against his earpiece. "That is what happened." he said. "She'll recover, but she's out of commission for the coming days, commander."

"Then there is no choice." the commander responded through the earpiece. " *Agent Wiper, you will have to remain at the Chaotix HQ at all times, until she has recovered. Leave the emerald hunting to your fellow teammates."*

"Speaking of, commander, have you found any traces of other

emeralds yet?" Wiper asked.

"None at the moment, but we are searching. We'll contact you if we find out anything. Over and out."

As the line went dead, Wiper looked up at the sky, before he closed his eyes, holding his hand over where Callous had scratched him. "...tsch."

Meanwhile, all the kids were gathered around Jill, who was lying calmly on the bed covered in bandages from head to toe.

"I can't believe that Metal Sonic would do this!" Rudy said. "First he takes away Cal, and then he hurts us!"

"Rudy, calm down," Striker said.

"..." Surprisingly, Jack was being pretty quiet, as he sat on a chair and looked at Jill. "...this sucks," he said with a frown.

"Guys, don't worry about me so much," Jill croaked. "I've been through worse…and I'm still okay, right?"

"Yeah, but Jill," Milo said, though he really couldn't continue with any reasoning.

"We're not letting Metal Sonic get away with it."

For Brick being completely silent and turned away from the group for most of the time, it was enough to call attention from them. "Sooner or later, Metal will get what's coming to him," he uttered.

Jack looked at Brick with surprised eyes for a bit, before looking away again. *...poor Jill...*

"That's later," Milo said. "Right now, you need your rest Jill..."

Surprisingly enough, Jill started trying to get up. "Jill! You need to lie back down!" Striker said.

Jill got as far as sitting up when she looked at Striker. "It's alright Striker...I don't feel the pain anymore."

"But you still need rest, Jill!" Jack said, as he stood up from the chair. "You have to try and relax, or you could get really hurt if you strain yourself too much!"

Just as Jack said that, Jill cringed at the sharp pain that shot up through her body. Naturally, she lied about not feeling any pain, but only for the sake of stopping them from worrying. Brick came over calmly and helped her lie back down gently. "Brownie, please just rest," he said.

The door then opened, with Boomer walking into the room. Immediately, Rudy spotted her and rushed to her. "You're back!" Due to difference in height, Rudy threw his arms around her legs, which caused her to stagger a little.

"…hi Rudy," Boomer finally said.

As Boomer entered the room, Jack looked towards her. "Boomer! You're back!" he said.

"Hey, she`s nay th' only one back home, ye know!" At that point, Whisker appeared in the doorway behind Boomer.

"Boomer! Captain Whisker!" exclaimed Ani, and before they knew it, all the kids rushed over to the two of them, giving them hugs and saying they were glad that they were back and okay. Jill smiled when she saw them, and even Brick managed to smile himself.

Finally, after all the commotion died out, Boomer approached Jill on the bed. "How are you doing?" she asked her.

"I'll be okay," Jill replied, closing her eyes. "As I've said before…I've had worse."

Boomer looked nervous, as she wasn't sure how to go about telling Jill the news. She knew Whisker wouldn't really be able to explain it, since the pirate robot didn't really know much of what was going on; truthfully, he was just dragged along this whole thing. "Jill," she said. "There's something I have to tell you…"

"What's wrong, Boomer?" Jack asked, as he looked at the duck with a concerned look. "Did something happen?"

"Um..." Truthfully, Whisker had little understanding of what was going on, but he knew that whatever news Boomer had, weren't good. "Ahoy, kids, why dasn't we leave th' grown-ups alone fer a while? Jill`s gonna need some rest, ye know..." he said, as he led the kids and Jack out of the room, leaving Jill, Boomer and Brick in the room.

Brick looked at Boomer, leaving for her to continue since the kids left the room.

"About the emerald…" Boomer said, scratching her head.

Jill sighed, and then she opened her eyes, looking at Boomer. "I already know," she said.

Boomer appeared surprised, and even Brick too, though Brick had no reason to be surprised.

"I already know, because the Shadow Android possessed the same power the emerald had," she said. "That and it told me that Callous works for Metal. I put the pieces together…and I pretty much knew in the beginning that you weren't going to stop her anyway."

Boomer blinked. Judging by this, it seemed like Jill was taking it so much better than what she and the others had envisioned. Brick wasn't as shocked as her, but he was still surprised how calm Jill was.

"I know how bad it is," Jill continued, as she looked up at the ceiling. "But I'm prepared for the bad things to come…" Suddenly, Jill tried to get up again.

"Brownie, don't," Brick said.

"No, let me get up this time," Jill said, and even though the burns hurt, she managed to actually get onto her feet, slowly. "I've been burned a thousand times over," she said. "But I'm done crying about my past now. Right now, I need to be strong, so I can protect the others from suffering the same way I did long ago."

"And you intend to do it on your own, like back then, I suppose?" As Jill got on her feet, Tails entered the room, looking at the ewe with a

smile. "It's good to see you on your feet, Jillian." he said.

Jill smiled. "I know I don't have to do it on my own anymore," she said. "I have you guys."

Brick smiled too, putting a hand on her shoulder. "That's right," he said, added with a thought; *she finally understands* . Jill's smile grew, putting her hand on his.

Chapter 15

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"There is one thing though," Jill finally said.

"What?" Boomer asked.

"I think I'm a little rusty," Jill said, "so I need to sharpen up my skills again. In fact, all of us need to start training. After all, it would be a good opportunity to help the kids start harnessing their skills. We stand a better chance fighting them together, yeah, but we just need to learn how to work together is all."

"That means having to tell them what's going on huh?" Boomer supposed.

"And how are you going to train in your condition?" Brick asked Jill; who turned to him.

"Like I said, I've done it a thousand times," she said, smiling.

Tails nodded, as he looked behind him. "If it comes down to that, then I suppose that we have no choice. But do you think we should tell them right away?" he asked, before looking at Jill again. "I fear that some of them may overreact, if you tell them in your current condition, Jill."

"I guess you're right about that," Jill said, "but even if we can't tell them now, I still need to—!"

"Whoa, wait a minute," Brick said. "You mean, you're going to start your training *now* ?"

"I should," Jill said. "But there are some things I need to take care of first. Professor, can I talk to you alone?"

Tails nodded at this request, before he glanced at Boomer and Brick. "You heard her." he said.

Boomer and Brick exchanged a glance, before the two of them left the room without another word. Jill sat back down on the bed, and then she looked up at Tails.

"I had another dream," she said.

"Really..." Tails mused, as he closed the door. "And what did you dream of this time?"

"Shadow."

Hearing that word, Tails looked at Jill with a surprised look. "Shadow..." he said, trying to hide the surprise in his voice. "...what did he have to say?"

"He gave me advice, because I worried about my past," she said. "He went through the same thing, and he told me that I should let it go so I can protect the present and future…" Then Jill looked strangely at Tails. "…and he told me to tell you hi."

"He..." Tails uttered, the look of disbelief on his face saying just about everything. Then, he closed his eyes and smiled. "...if you see him again, greet him from me as well, Jill." he said, and if the ewe would look closely, she would see a lone tear running from his left eye.

Jill saw it, and then she looked away a moment silently. "Professor, if I can interact like that in my dreams…" she said, turning back to him. "…Then there's something going on."

Tails blinked, before he wiped his eyes. "That is a bit strange..." he said with a nod, before he held his chin in thought. "And this has happened multiple times... maybe it has something to do with your powers, Jill?"

"Yeah, maybe," Jill answered. "But its weird...its not like I'm trying to reach them, but its almost as if *they're* reaching *me* ." Jill stood back up, more easily than before, and walked over to the window, looking out down at the kids who were playing tag with Whisker. "Then there's my broken memories," she said.

Tails hummed, as he joined Jill by the window. "I have to admit... in

all my years, the most puzzling thing I have encountered has been your connection to Purity, Jillian. But I'm sure that in due time, we'll have it resolved."

"I wonder," Jill said, as her eyes squinted thoughtfully. "…the only way my memory suddenly came back to me was when I faced Metal in my other form. The only way I was able to transform was because I lost control of my powers…I grew unstable because of Shadow's death."

"Do you suppose that if you transform again, something else will happen?" Tails inquired, as he glanced curiously at Jill.

"That's what I'm hoping," Jill said, looking back at Tails, "and that's why I need to train, because I think that if I start working with my powers again, my memories will come back clearer. There are still a lot of unknown elements to my past that I need to figure out."

"Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out." Tails said with a nod, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. "I wouldn't doubt it for a second."

At that point, they heard knocking on the door.

Jill attention was drawn to the door. "Come in," she permitted.

At that point, the door opened, and in stepped Wiper, who gave Jill a nod as he entered the room. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything." he said with a hiss.

"It's fine," Jill said. Then she looked over at Tails. "By the way Professor," she said. "I told Wiper everything, so he knows." Well, Jill never really told Wiper about the dreams, but she figured it was a detail that wasn't necessary.

"I see..." Tails said with a nod, as he glanced at the snake.

"I can only assume that Boomer has informed you of what happened." Wiper said, as he folded his arms. "I've informed the GUN Commander about this, along with the injuries you sustained." As he spoke, he hissed lowly. "She's offered to use whatever resources GUN has to locate the Chaos Emeralds before Metal Sonic can obtain them, so we won't need to worry too much about

him taking them."

Jill nodded. "That's sounds like our best bet for now, and yes, she told me what happened." She looked back out the window, and then, "…did Callous tell you anything informative, Wiper?" she asked with curiosity.

"She told me about that dark energy..." Wiper said, as he held the area of his gut where Callous had attacked him. "She called it Corruption; something that can happen to anyone..."

"Anything else?" Tails inquired.

"Nothing useful." Wiper hissed. "Apart from the fact that she's undead, and..." Then, he scoffed in disgust. "...she found me cute."

Jill thought about it some more. "I knew she was undead…" she finally said. "And being pretty much the complete opposite of me, she'll flirt with anyone she sees fit." Then she paced around. "Corruption…" It was starting to trigger something in her mind; that sounded familiar, just like Purity. "Corruption…it can happen to anyone." The dark energy was called Corruption…she felt like she should have known that.

Now she started to feel strange. "Corruption…" she didn't feel like herself anymore.

Tails and Wiper would suddenly notice her eyes were changing. The white became green, and they glowed. It also looked like she was starting to lose her balance.

Surprised by this, Tails thought of backing away at first, but he stood his ground. "Jill?" he asked.

Wiper, however, gritted his teeth, before suddenly grabbing hold of Jill's shoulders. "Hey! What's wrong? Are you alright?" he said with a hiss.

"Corruption," she uttered, sounding strange. "A dark power that resonates deep within Chaos…those that are drawn to the seven servers by greed and lust for power are soon taken over by this dark power, and there is scarcely any hope of being saved by this power.

It lies it wait, underneath a facade of good feelings…it lies in the darkness…"

Wiper blinked, as he tilted his head, hissing. "...Jill?"

That seemed to snap her out of the strange trance, for in an instant, Jill's eyes returned to normal with a gasp. Then she blinked, and looked at Wiper. "Yeah?" she responded, as if nothing happened.

"You..." Wiper uttered, before he let go of her. "...it's nothing." he said, before he turned away from her. "I'll get in contact with the commander, in case they've found traces of the Chaos Emeralds." he said, though he didn't move from where he stood.

Jill continued to blink, and then touched her head. "…I saw it happen a lot," she finally said. "The way Corruption takes over someone…it's not a pretty sight…"

Wiper blinked, as he looked back at Jill. "...how come?" he asked.

Jill looked at Wiper, and then her gaze was directed at his cut with arched brows. "First, it tampers with their emotions," she said. "It starts to cloud their judgment. Then it rises to a point of insanity… then once they lose their mind, it takes them. Sometimes, they panic hysterically…they cry out…" Jill shuddered, and shut her eyes.

"Does it..." Wiper muttered, as he looked away. "...we should keep an eye on Boomer, then." he said. "She may not have told you, but Callous got her from behind. If Corruption can spread from an attack like that..."

"As long as you keep calm, you might be fine, and if you start to feel unnaturally emotional, let me know," Jill said. "I may not be able to heal the scars, but I can keep Corruption from taking over someone if it isn't too late…"

"Good to know." Wiper said, as he began walking out of the room. However, as he was about to step out of the room, he stopped. Hissing, he pressed his finger against his ear. "This is Agent Wiper. What's the situation?" he said.

After a short while, however, his eyes widened. "...what? You...

you're not serious, are you?" he uttered in shock. "H-hey! Come in! What happened? Are you there?!"

Tails looked at Wiper with an astounded look, as he hadn't seen the snake act so worried ever since being introduced to him. "Wiper?"

"Wiper, what's wrong?" Jill asked nervously.

Wiper didn't reply at first, as his hand fell away from his ear. "...they sent a squad team towards the ruined base to locate any survivors... but I just heard that the entire unit..." As he spoke, he leant against a wall, a look of utter disbelief on his face. "...the entire unit was massacred. Not one survivor."

"That took longer than expected." On the outskirts of Westopolis, Queen approached the city, holding a blue gem in her left hand, and some splotches of red on her black fur were visible. "But I got what they wanted..."

"Not bad…" When Queen got to a certain point, she'd find Callous sitting on a nearby bench, eying Queen. "You didn't even hesitate. I like that."

Queen glanced at Callous, before looking away. "I encountered a bit more resistance than expected. Likely, the commander wanted to get the emerald out of there before Metal Sonic could have claimed it." Then, she scoffed. "But those members she sent were no warriors. They lacked the finesse that a true warrior possesses."

"Hm, you seem fixated on this whole 'warrior' thing," Callous said.

"That is how I was raised." Queen responded. "On the battlefield, there is no such thing as mercy. A select few in GUN were specifically taught that." Then, she looked at Callous again. "Metal Sonic is still in that lab of his?"

"Yeah, I guess," Callous said, shrugging. "Cal went off to find another emerald, so I'm left all by my little lonesome." Then she stood up from the bench, stretching. "What's your story anyway?" she asked. "You seem to have a lot of history with that snake."

Queen didn't reply at first, as she closed her eyes. "My history with GUN and Dawn is a long one. Shall I give you the abridged version, or would you prefer the whole picture?"

"Hm," Callous rubbed her chin a moment, and then looked at Queen. "Go ahead with the long version. I've got free time."

"...very well." Queen said, as she sat down, looking towards Callous. "At a young age, several of GUN's future agents were trained in the art of battle. They were taught to be as ruthless and vicious as they could on the field, but still stay on the path of 'justice'. Out of the 25 children who underwent this training, only 7 made it out, both alive and battle-readied. Dawn and I were two of those children."

"I see," said Callous, growing interested. "And who were the other 5 children?"

"...their names escape me." Queen replied, as she closed her eyes. "I only remember their species; a tiger, a raven, a wolf, a mantis, and a rhino." Then, she shook her head. "In any case, when the training concluded, we were assigned code names. Dawn was assigned Wiper, and I was assigned Queen. Then, we were put in charge of seven different squads; Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta and Omega... ironic, wouldn't you say?"

"Sure," Callous agreed, rolling her eyes. "So, you said you were part of a rebellion against GUN? What was that all about?"

"The rebellion..." Queen muttered, as she opened her eyes. "...Omega's leader felt that we were being used by GUN, and that it conflicted with our warrior nature. Out of the other six leaders, only Dawn refused to heed the call; he had lost the true edge a warrior needs. However, we were set up, and the operation fell apart. Everyone but I managed to escape, and I took the fall for all of them..."

"Bummer," Callous said. "So, I'm guessing that all the others fled off and hid?"

"I would assume so." Queen shrugged. "It has been five months since the operation fell to pieces, and when the operation was put

together, there were some who doubted the judgment of Omega's leader, such as Gamma and Zeta's leaders... I do wonder where they now reside."

"Well, do you ever plan on hunting them down and extracting your revenge for them betraying you?" Callous asked.

"No," Queen said, as she shook her head. "Even though I took the fall, I do not blame them for it. It would be good to learn of wherever they are now, but I have no ill will towards them..."

"Ah," Callous responded. "But you still have an ill will towards Dawn; or Wiper, or whatever you want to call him."

"Well, needless to say, we didn't get along too well, even before the rebellion." Queen shrugged. "He lost the honor and edge of a warrior, and focused only on fulfilling his 'duty' to the world. From the looks of it, he still goes by that philosophy." Then, she scoffed. "No warrior would take pride in serving others."

"Really now?" Callous said with a chuckle. "Well, what a strange philosophy it is. The girl runs by a similar one; that she'll pledge her loyalty to those who need her help."

"Hmph. Those two seem to have a few things in common." Queen scoffed, before she glanced at Callous. "What about you? What is your story, Callous?"

Callous grew a smirk as she looked at her. "Well, to start off, I'm connected to the girl. She has a very dark past for someone like her, having to battle conflicts no one else could stand. A vampire named Deity Novagod spent his time ensuring utter misery in her life, for reasons beyond what anyone understands. There was point where he imprisoned her, and ripped out a piece of her soul in order to construct a dark doppelganger in her image." Then she sat back down on the bench and gestured to herself. "You happen to be in the presence of that dark doppelganger," she chuckled.

"...so you are a construct." Queen noted, as she kept her eyes on Callous. "But why did he feel the need to create a counterpart to that girl?" she asked.

"Well, I represent everything she isn't," Callous said. "I know her weaknesses, her fears, and because I am connected to her, I know how she ticks in every other way imaginable. For instance," she chuckled a moment, closing her eyes, "did you know she has an irrational fear of fire?"

"I didn't." Queen responded flatly. "Though in fairness, I knew virtually nothing about her until I met you, Callous. But do carry on."

"All in all, she is a being that not many can understand," she said. "Obviously she is powerful, otherwise, Metal wouldn't be scheming ways to triumph over the power she has. She doesn't even understand herself, and in recent times, her memory has been tainted."

Callous stood back up and turned her back to Queen for a moment. "Back in her past, she thinks that she defeated me and sealed away the vampire in that black emerald, but the truth is, she is only half-right, for you see…" She threw a glance back at the bear and a very evil smirk was on her face, "…I was the one who tampered with her memories."

"You tampered with..." Queen mused, as she stood up. "...and what parts of her memory did you alter?"

"Basically, I made her think that I was gone for good," Callous said. "That way, I could snoop around as I please, and I was able to observe a LOT of things." She turned around and faced Queen then. "There's a secret to the two of us that no one else at all knows. This is another memory I tampered with…wanna know what it is?"

"...why not?" Queen said with a shrug. "Go on, Callous."

"So, she seals away the vampire in the black emerald," Callous starts, "and I come when she least expects it. She tries to fight me, but something won't allow it. Not only can I manipulate her memories Queen," and she paused, walking up to the bear, "but I can manipulate her emotions, and that can ultimately manipulate her actions. Corruption has the uncanny power of manipulation to those it inflicted, but because I am basically like a twin sister to her, I can directly mess with her mind. I knocked her out that night, and did

what I did to change her memories, and also…I managed to lock away her powers completely, obscuring her from ever using them."

"Until recently, I take it." Queen guessed, as she looked down at Callous. "How do you suppose she broke the seal?"

"That, I have to admit, I don't know," Callous said. "She never even knew about it because of her memories, but I can't help but feel that some other force broke the seal somehow…and I intend to figure that out."

"...so let me guess. You're using Metal Sonic to try and figure out who broke the seal?" Queen asked, as she folded her arms.

Callous laughed, "Who said I was using Metal Sonic?" Though she shrugged, "Okay, so I'm using him, and that's only half the reason why I'm acquiring his assistance." Then she turned and started walking off. "As for the rest of it, well…that's my business."

Watching Callous as she left, Queen nodded. "Very well. Good luck with your business, then." she said, as she began making her way into town, towards Metal Sonic's lab.

When Queen was leaving, Callous quickly glanced at her before she looked ahead of where she's going. *I do know one thing,* she thought. *For some reason, it involves that old fox's friends from long ago…maybe Metal has information on them that he'd like to share.*

"What do you mean massacred?!" Boomer questioned.

"What else would I mean when I say 'massacred'?" Wiper responded, as he now sat in a chair, trying to calm down, as he massaged his temples. "Slaughtered, decimated, torn to shreds. The entire unit was massacred."

"That's... that's unreal, y'know!" Newt uttered in complete shock. "Who the hell could do something like that?!"

"Unbelievable..." Natal uttered, as she looked at Wiper with a horrified expression.

"Only Metal," Jill said. "After all, you guys had a Chaos Emerald too."

"No..." Wiper uttered, as he stopped massaging his temples. "The last message I got before the line died out... it specifically stated that a woman had committed the deed. And I have a hunch on who it is..."

"It's Queen, isn't it?!" Boomer said which just made her angrier.

"Calm down Boomer," Brick said. Luckily, she did, though she grunted and turned away from the group with folded arms. Jill watched Boomer with concern. "Anyhow, since they're after the emeralds," Brick continued, "The four of us; Me, Boomer, Newt and Natal, all discussed that we should set out and try to hunt some of the emeralds down."

"Boomer has to stay," Jill said suddenly, which drew attention.

"What?!" Boomer obviously didn't like the sound of that. "Why?!"

"We need some back up support in case another Shadow Android shows up here," Jill said; though she lied about the reason for her to stay, she was still right about that. Boomer didn't buy it judging by the sharp look she gave Jill, but she didn't argue either. Jill decided to ignore the look she gave her as she looked to Brick. "Take Whisker and the kids with you," she said. "They need to start learning how to fight."

Brick nodded.

"Hey, why can't Wiper help out with finding the Chaos Emeralds, y'know?" Newt asked, as he glanced at the snake.

"As Jill said, we need someone on standby here. Boomer and I would likely suffice against the androids." Wiper replied, as he glanced at the salamander.

"...understood." Natal said with a nod, as she glanced at Jill.

"If you're planning to do that, then you guys should get going pronto," Jill said, turning to Brick again. "Knowing Metal, he probably

already has two or three in his grasp by now."

"Yeah," Brick said. "We'll just grab the kids and Whisker and take off then." Brick was then caught off guard when Jill came forward and hugged him.

"Be careful," she said, when she pulled away.

Brick nodded again. Then he turned to the others, "C'mon."

Natal nodded, as she cracked her neck, before walking past Brick.

"Alright, let's get those rocks as soon as we can, y'know!" Newt said enthusiastically, as he followed Natal.

"Cainfield." Wiper suddenly said, as he tossed a small object at Brick, for him to catch. "That's an earpiece. We'll use that to keep in touch."

"Thanks," Brick said, and then he followed the two of them out the door, closing it behind them.

"Alright, I know that wasn't the real reason you wanted me to stay behind," Boomer said, once she, Wiper, Jill and Tails were alone in the room. "What's going on?"

"Boomer, right now you're showing very disquieting symptoms of something," Jill said, as she walked to the duck. "You're too emotionally involved in all this."

"Am not!" Boomer yelled back defensively, which would clearly imply otherwise.

"Are too." Wiper said, as he stood up, placing a hand on Boomer's shoulder. "The reason I'm staying is the same reason you have to stay behind. We can't risk losing ourselves."

Tails nodded, as he looked at the duck. "You have to understand, Boomer..."

"Understand what?!" Boomer demanded with a stomp of her foot. "I don't even know what you're talking about! What do you mean I'll

lose myself?!"

"Boomer, Callous inflicted you with a dangerous energy that can take over you," Jill said. "If you allow your emotions to control you, then you'll never be able to fight it."

That surprisingly quieted Boomer down. Seeing Boomer calmer, Jill sighed with relief, "I know you don't like it when people leave you behind, but—"

"Why did you tell him to take the kids with him anyway?" Boomer asked.

"As I said before, they need some experience," Jill said. "That…and if something starts happening to you, I don't want them to be around to see it happen."

"Nothing's going to happen to her." Wiper said with a nod to Jill, before he hissed. "Or me, for that matter. So don't worry about that, Jill."

"I'm a little curious," Boomer said. "What about you? You've been hurt a lot more than we have…how come you don't—"

"The Purity in my body gets rid of it instantly," Jill said. "Let's say it's like I have immunity to it."

Boomer then scratched her head with embarrassment. "Oh, yeah, I guess I should have figured that."

"Nevertheless, we should all be cautious." Wiper said, as he let go of Boomer, before glancing at Jill. "You're going to be training here?"

"Yeah," Jill nodded. "I figure I'll do that when everyone's out getting the emeralds."

"Very well." Wiper said with a nod, before he walked off. "I'll try to get some sleep, if you'll excuse me."

After awhile, Boomer followed him. "I think I will too," she said.

"Sheesh, this place is like a maze... are ya sure that this is where the Emerald's supposed to be?" Some time had passed, but now, Brick's team, consisting of Newt, Natal, Jack, Ani, Striker, Rudy, Milo, Buddy and Whisker were traversing through a thick forest, and judging from the slope they traversed, it lead to some form of mountain. "Because I think we might have gotten lost, y'know!"

"Nonsense." Natal responded to Newt, as she was the one leading them through the wilderness; supposedly, being the espionage expert, she knew about traversing through woods such as this one.

"Really?" Striker asked. "It feels like we've been walking in circles…"

"She's heading the right way according to the radar," Brick remarked, with his eyes locked on the tool in his hand rather than the path.

"But why did all of us have to tag along?" Jack asked. "Wouldn't it be more convenient to only bring a few?"

"The kid`s right; 't feels a bit excessive t' be havin' so many swabbies lookin' fer that gem." Whisker shot in, as he had his arms folded.

"Not with nut jobs like Metal Sonic around, y'know." Newt stated, as he glanced at Natal. "We gettin' any closer?"

"Ask Brick." Natal replied blankly, as she looked around the area.

However, unbeknownst to the group, something within the woodwork was watching them...

"We're getting closer, but it's still a bit of a walk," Brick said, as he looked up from the radar. Then he turned to the kids. "You guys wanted to help out, and we're giving you an opportunity to help," he said.

"But Brick," Milo said. "Didn't you say it might be too dangerous for us?"

"Well, personally, I think you guys should get a chance to show them what you all can do," Brick said, smiling. "After all, you guys

have abilities not a lot of other people have."

"Well, Ani and Milo do." Jack noted, as he rubbed the wolf and lion's heads. "Striker's just very good with a baseball bat, and I'm just very good at playing the harmonica. Rudy, what can you do, again?"

"Did he forget about th' microphone in that instrument o' his, or somethin'?" Whisker muttered, though Jack didn't seem to notice that comment.

"I'm good at jumping!" Rudy replied. "And I mean REALLY good!"

"Guys, I just heard something!" Ani said suddenly, and the others would notice her ears perk which made everyone stop.

"Hn? What's the matter, y'know?" Newt asked, as he glanced at at Ani.

"...something's coming." Natal uttered, as she drew her katanas, looking behind them.

Soon, everyone would be able to hear stomping. Stomping that was slowly, but surely, approaching the group. " ***...target... located...*** "

Milo and Buddy whimpered as they hid behind Jack. "Wh-wh-wh-what do you th-think that is?!" Milo questioned, as he shuddered at each stomp he heard.

Striker drew out his aluminum bat. "If it's something bad, then we'll have to fight it!" he said.

" ***...objective... clear...*** " the metallic voice uttered, as the stomps only got closer and closer.

Whisker narrowed his eyes, as he tried making out what was approaching. "...move!" Suddenly, he rushed forward, intending to slam his arms down on this assailant.

However, as he slammed down, his arms were grabbed by another pair of robotic arms, keeping him still. " ***...must eliminate all Eggman robots!*** " At that point, Whisker was blown back, as the assailant's identity was revealed; a large, hulking red robot, with

some text written on its side: E-123Ù.

"What is THAT?!" Milo shrieked.

"Cool! Another robot!!!" Ani exclaimed.

"Wait a minute," Brick examined the new robot closely. *Elmininate Eggman's robots?* He thought. *…there's something about this that seems familiar.*

" ***Complete annihilation!*** " the robot exclaimed, just as it aimed its hands at Whisker. Then, from its wrists, it shot several rounds at the pirate robot, knocking him further backwards.

"Hey, hey... ye think that`s gonnna be enough t' do me in, matey?" Whisker uttered, as he aimed his own hands at the larger robot. "If so, ye`re barkin' up th' wrong tree, landlubber!" At that point, he shot out his fists at the red robot, knocking it back as well.

"AWESOME! Robot fight!" Jack uttered in complete awe, as one could sort of see sparkles around the lion's eyes as he watched the two robots square off.

From nowhere, Ani pulled out a bag of popcorn and was nibbling while watching the fight intently. "Go Capt. Whisker!!!" she cheered.

Just then, it occurred to Brick why it seemed familiar. Both Shadow and Tails have mentioned something like this, but the robot had a name. "Omega?!" he blurted.

Just as the robot was about to retaliate against Whisker for the last attack, Brick shouting that name made it stop. " ***...Omega.*** " it uttered. " ***Omega... I have not heard that name... in a long time.*** "

"Huh? The fight's over?" Jack moaned, as he pouted. "Bummer. It was just getting good..."

"Wait, hold on..." Newt uttered, as he eyed the robot. "...no way. No way! Natal, that's him! One of Team Dark's members, y'know! E-123 Omega!"

"Seriously?!" Natal exclaimed in utter shock, as she eyed the red

robot in awe.

Brick didn't think about whether or not Omega was trigger happy at the moment, but he walked right on up to it. "You're really Omega…" he uttered. "…Shadow told us about you."

"Hey, that's right!" said Striker, as he walked up to Omega as well. "Now I remember! You were in the stories they told us; Shadow and the Professor!"

" ***Shadow... you knew Shadow?*** " Omega uttered, as he looked down at Brick. Then, he suddenly raised his arm, aiming it at Whisker. " ***Stand back; Eggman's robots must be destroyed.*** "

"Hey, wait, Mr. Omega-Robot!" Jack shot in, as he walked up to the large robot. "Captain Whisker's our friend! He's not with Eggman anymore!"

"That's right," Brick said. "When he came to us, a friend of ours fixed him up, so now he's on our side. We're trying to collect the emeralds so Metal Sonic can't use them."

" ***...Metal Sonic...*** " Omega uttered. Then, he suddenly lowered his arms. " ***Metal Sonic is a main priority. He must be destroyed. If you are against him, you are with me.*** "

"No way!" Newt said with an overly excited tone. "THE Omega is gonna fight alongside us?! That's the coolest thing ever, y'know!"

"Well, he be powerful, so 't`d benefit us greatly!" Whisker said, as he placed his hands on his hips.

"Lucky break..." Natal said with a sigh of relief.

"That's great, we could use your help," Brick said with a nod. "My name's Brick Cainfield."

"Anistasia Symphony!" Ani said. "But just call me Ani!" Seeing Milo and Buddy too scared to speak, she directed a thumb at them. "The lion is Milo, and the Chao is Buddy."

"They call me Striker the Slugger," Striker said, putting his bat up on

his shoulder with a big smile.

"My name's Jack! Jack the Lion!" Jack said with a huge grin.

"My name's Newt the Salamander, y'know! And her name's Natal the Bullfrog, y'know!" Newt said, as he pointed back at Natal.

"Pleasure's mine." Natal said with a nod to the red robot.

"And I be Captain Whisker, matey!" Whisker said with a hearty laugh.

" ***Your names have been recorded.*** " Omega said with a nod, as he looked down at Brick. " ***I am unit E-123 Omega, at your service.*** "

"Now that all that's settled," Brick said, "let's continue up the path."

A large groan filled the air.

"What?" Brick asked.

"Can't we take a break for a minute?" whined Ani. "My feet hurt!"

"Yeah, and I'm feeling hungry..." Jack groaned, and just as he said that, a low growl could be heard from his stomach.

"What, you didn't eat lunch before we moved out, or somethin'?" Newt questioned, as he raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe we can jus' take a quick breather. 't wouldna hurt ere, would 't?" Whisker inquired, as he glanced at Brick.

Meanwhile, up above them, something was keeping watch of them...

"I guess it wouldn't hurt," said Brick. He wasn't really the kind of guy to take a break; he had a lot of energy and endurance. After working on a farm, it was expected. "Omega, what are you doing around here anyway?" he asked out of curiosity.

" ***...after Shadow's death, I searched for the Chaos Emeralds. A signal came from this area, so I ventured here to find it.*** "

"Speakin' of which, how far are we from that emerald now?" Newt asked, as he casually grabbed the radar from Brick, before observing it. "...hey... is it just me, or is that bleeping dot right where we are?" As it turned out, the signal from the Chaos Emerald was just about dead-center where the group stood.

"Right…above…" Milo pointed above them, quivering with fear, which caused them to look up.

Just as they looked up, however, something suddenly pressed all of them right into the ground, though whatever it was, it wasn't tangible or visible. "Wha... what's going on?" Jack croaked, as he tried looking up.

"This power..." Natal uttered, as her eyes slowly widened. "No way..."

"Don't tell me... Zeta's leader?!" Newt exclaimed.

"You are correct, Newton," a female voice said. At that moment, right besides a tree, the group could see what appeared to be a large, Mobian raven, though her body was wrapped in what seemed to be a cloak from feathers. "They call me Sage."

"What the hell do you want with us?!" Brick yelled, even though he could hardly move.

"Sage, release them at once!" a dark voice growled.

Another figure hopped down from the trees; a male Mobian wolf. He bore a lot of scars on his face, and he was even blind in one of his eyes. If Natal and Newt caught a glance at him, they would recognize him to be Gamma's former leader; Hunter. "Don't you know who they are?" he continued to growl.

"Of course I do, Hunter." Sage said in a dry tone, as she began pointing at each of the people she held down. "Captain Whisker. E-123 Omega. Brick Cainfield. Striker the Slugger. Buddy the Chao. Milo Hawk-Feather. Newton the Salamander. Natal the Bullfrog. James Leoniel..."

As she said that name, Jack's eyes widened. "...how did she figure

out that?" he uttered.

"...and Anistasia Symphony." the raven finished, as she chuckled. "I just didn't want them to run around. After all, I believe they deserve some explanation... Midnight." As she said this, all of a sudden, everyone in the group would feel themselves free from whatever held them down.

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-what's goin' on, y'know?!" Newt uttered in sheer fright, as he looked at the wolf and raven. "Gamma and Zeta's leaders?! What the hell's goin' on around here?!"

"Perplexing..." Natal uttered, as she looked at the raven.

The first thing Hunter did when she released them was coming to Ani and helping her up onto her feet. Ani was a bit confused by this act, looking up at him. "Uh…thanks?" she said. "Who're you anyway?"

Hunter just looked at her. *She's alive,* he thought, trying to hide his astonishment. *I can't believe it.*

"Hello?" Ani said, snapping her fingers in front of his face.

Hunter blinked when he was snapped out of it. "I'll explain a little later," he said. "Out here, we're under unwanted surveillance."

Brick got back up and glared between Sage and Hunter. "What do you mean, 'unwanted surveillance'?"

"Follow us," Hunter said, ignoring Brick's question.

"Wait, but what about the Chaos Emerald?" Striker asked.

Hunter pointed to Sage. "She has it," he said. "Now, just shut up and come with us."

Chapter 16

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It had been quiet back at Chaotix HQ.

"Wiper, would you go check on Jill for us?" Cream asked when the snake walked into the room. "I think she's still outside in the woods, training."

"She is?" Wiper asked, as he glanced at the rabbit. "...for that long... heh. Takes me back..."

"Wiper?" Tails looked at the snake with a raised eyebrow, wondering just what he was thinking of.

"...nothing." Wiper chuckled, before he began walking off. "I'll see to her, don't you worry."

Once Wiper left the room, Cream looked at Tails. "Sometimes they make me curious," she said. "GUN isn't run the way it was used to long ago…"

"Yes... things have changed." Tails said with a sigh, as he closed his eyes. "It seems that with Shadow, the old GUN faded away... I doubt the new commander to be the one to blame, though. This might have begun years ago, after Towers passed away..."

"Well, I certainly hope the changes were in good interest," Cream remarked, as she took a sip of her tea.

Wiper would wander awhile through the woods, and at first it was silent.

Then at some point, he'd start to hear something.

Singing.

Hearing the singing, Wiper raised an eyebrow. *Is that...* he thought, as he silently approached where this sound was coming from, as to not disturb the singer.

Soon enough, he'd find who he was looking for. Jill was sitting on the edge of a creek with her feet in the water, and it turned out that she was the one singing. It was a soothing, comforting melody, and it looked like she wasn't really paying much attention to anything else.

Wiper blinked at this sight, before he leant against a tree, watching Jill. *...some training this is,* he thought, before he eventually cleared his throat to get Jill's attention.

Jill stopped singing, and turned to see Wiper as she stood up. "Oh, I didn't know you were there," she said. When she turned around to face him, Wiper would notice that her burns weren't as severe as they had been earlier. In fact, it looked like a good portion of them were disappearing, and some of her bandages had been removed.

Wiper raised an eyebrow when he saw that, but merely shook his head. "Cream wanted me to check up on you; said you had been training all this time... but I didn't expect this kind of training." he said with a chuckle, before he hissed.

"Oh," Jill laughed. "Believe it or not, it *is* a part of training. It's a style of meditation…" Jill looked back to the water in the creek. "I sing because it relieves stress, and since my powers are connected with my emotion, that's a good way to concentrate."

"I see..." Wiper said with a nod, as he looked at the water as well. "...does Corruption work the same way? In that it is powered by emotions?" he asked on a whim.

"Yeah, it does," Jill replied. "It feeds on the negative emotions, like greed, jealousy, wrath, and others." Then Jill looked at Wiper worriedly. "How have you been? You haven't felt unusually emotional, have you?"

"I can't say that I have." Wiper shrugged. "Then again, we were trained to never let our emotions take advantage of our actions... it'd

make us sloppy out on the field, they said." Then, he hissed lowly. "There I go again, thinking about the old days..."

"Old days?" questioned Jill curiously, walking up to him.

Wiper was silent for a short while. "...25 children." he finally said. "Many years ago, 25 children were brought to hell. Only seven made it out. Based on when they got out of that hell, they were given a name: Dawn, Twilight, Sunrise, Noon, Sunset, Dusk and Midnight." Then, he hissed. "I was Dawn."

Jill was a bit surprised at the term that Wiper decided to use to describe it. "Dawn…" Jill uttered. "And this Queen…was she another child that made it out too?" After hearing about her from Newt and Natal, she wondered.

"Yes... she was Dusk." Wiper nodded. "After some years, we were given special codenames. I became Wiper, Dusk became Queen, Noon became Ripper, Sunset became Miser, Midnight became Hunter, Sunrise became Sage, and Twilight became King. Eventually, we were put into seven divisions; Alpha for me, Beta for Sunset, Gamma for Midnight, Delta for Dusk, Epsilon for Noon, Zeta for Sunrise, and Omega for Twilight."

"So, Dawn is your real name…" Jill muttered. "And there were others." While thinking about it, she wondered even more. "Where are the others?" she asked. "And…what happened to the children that didn't make it?"

"Dead." Wiper said with a heavy tone. "We were put through hell, after all... likely, they only expected three to survive the ordeal." he added, before he hissed. "In any case, Twilight became dissatisfied with the way GUN used us to carry out their operations; he is ambitious, and wanted to show the world what we were really capable of. I wasn't interested in anything of the sort, and both Midnight and Sunrise had doubts about this, but all the squad leaders rallied under Twilight, save for me."

Then, he sighed. "But someone talked. I know that I didn't do it, but someone alerted GUN to Twilight's plans. They fled, and Dusk covered their escape. She was originally to be executed..." Then, he

hissed. "...but traitor to GUN or not, Dusk was still my comrade. I had a talk with the commander, and she allowed Dusk to live, though she didn't go unpunished; she was frozen alive in the cryolab. Where the other five are now, I do not know..."

Jill was left without words. She wasn't sure what to say, since after all, she had her share of hard times. She was just even more surprised that the Government allowed something like that. Jill was free compared to them; they were like wild animals locked up in a cage and whipped to death.

"So Queen was freed by Callous…and now the word is that she's working for Metal," Jill supposed.

"Yes... I guess that Queen was the one who attacked the GUN base and claimed the Chaos Emerald. But I have my doubts that she will stay with Metal Sonic permanently." Wiper said. "Either that... or she could attempt to rally Twilight and his group under Metal... but her eventually parting with Metal seems more likely."

That sounded logical to Jill, but it didn't stop her from feeling sympathetic. "I'm sorry," she said. "It must be hard, even if you were trained not to show your emotions."

"...there is one thing that I never tell anyone I talk to, and you must promise not to tell anyone about it." Wiper said, as he closed his eyes. "...the day Dusk was sealed away... was the first and only time I ever cried."

Jill's heart grew heavy hearing that. It sounded like Queen was fairly important to Wiper. "…I promise," she said, setting a hand on his shoulder. Then she looked at the burn across his stomach. Judging by what he told her, it would mean that Queen would probably be the one to evoke the Corruption to a point where it will start attacking his body. This made her worry a little bit more.

"...thank you." Wiper uttered, as he placed his own hand on Jill's hand. "That means a lot to me..." Then, he removed the hand, before clearing his throat. "In any case, I believe that Cream is waiting for us."

"Alright then," Jill said. "I think I'm done for the day anyway."

"So…let me get this straight," Brick said, rubbing his temples. "You guys were in a rebellion against GUN, but due to a drawback, you're all hiding now?"

"That is correct." Sage nodded, though she didn't seem somber, but rather neutral. "However, there arose some animosity between Hunter and King, and we split off. I do believe that they're still looking for us; King, Ripper, Miser..."

"What are those guys like, anyway?" Jack asked out of the blue.

"Oh, they're somethin' to behold, y'know." Newt said, as he folded his arms. "Ripper's a real menace to behold; he only does what he does so he can slaughter people, regardless of who they are. Creepy guy, y'know..."

"Miser, on the other hand, is a tragic character," Sage sighed. "She has lost the very bearing on life itself, and fruitlessly pursues a way to finally die... but she can't. From what I gather, she is immortal, and nothing has been able to kill her. In any case, you don't want to meet either of them in battle."

"They lost their minds," Hunter replied with his eyes closed. "Simply put." Then Hunter turned to Newt and Natal. "But you say that Queen is still alive? I thought she was executed, last I heard."

"That's what we all heard as well, y'know…" Newt replied, as he scratched his head. "…but she wasn't. I think Wiper knows somethin' about it, but we haven't gotten to ask him."

As he said that, Sage broke out in laughter. "Oh, that brings back so many memories. That's just something that Dawn would do, wouldn't you agree, Hunter?"

"You dasn't seem too torn o'er th' lad's nay joinin' that revolution o' yours, Sage," Whisker uttered, as he had his arms folded, glancing at Sage.

"Oh, that revolution again…" Sage chuckled. "Kind may be ambitious, but he simply won't accept reality at a face-value. I can't exactly blame him, but, you know."

"And…Metal Sonic returned?" Hunter asked. "I didn't think he was real. We all heard stories about him from GUN's database, but I never really believed it."

"Of course he's real!" yelled Ani. "Metal Sonic killed Shadow!"

"I know," Sage said with a sigh, though she didn't lose her smile. "It's painful, but time heals every wound. Besides, with enough training, I'm sure you'll eventually avenge-"

"Wait, hang on!" Jack said, as he looked at Sage with curious eyes. "How did you know? We've never met before, and you could tell all of our names with no problem, and you know what Metal Sonic did to Uncle Shadow! What's the deal with that?"

"Psychokinetic," Natal said, as she glanced cautiously at the raven, "and telepath."

"You are right, Natal," Sage chuckled. "And no offense, but all of you are as easy to read as the newspaper."

"So…you already know that there's also someone strong enough to fight him too?" Brick supposed.

"Indeed," Sage laughed. "But I only skimmed through those details, so if I want the full story, I would have to dig a bit deeper…" Then she grinned mischievously. "How about it? Would you like a demonstration?"

Hearing that, both Newt and Natal for horrified looks on their faces. "No way…" Newt uttered. "You do know what could happen if you do something like that?"

"Horrifying," added Natal.

Brick looked at Sage sharply. "I'd like to see that," he said. On a side note, he didn't usually believe what people said at first, which sometimes made him a bit bold.

"I'm not sure you want to do that, bud," Hunter warned.

"Why not?" Brick asked. "Go ahead, try it."

"Splendid! Now, just keep in mind; this might sting a little." As Sage said these words, she locked her sight on Brick, before a glint passed in her eyes. At that point, Brick started to feel something akin to a headache building up in his skull.

Brick winced when he felt it, but he stared right back at Sage sternly, refusing to admit that he felt it.

"…stubborn…" grumbled Hunter as he shook his head.

"Not for long~" Sage said in a playful tone, as she slowly stood up, the headache in Brick's head continuing to swell. "Ooh…used to be a farm boy, didn't you?" she chuckled, as she began approaching the bull. "Hrm…I see, there's some things you hate to be called…oh my, there's a large space in there, reserved for only one person…" As she said these things, she was soon right in front of Brick, looking down at him with a simple smile.

Brick now held his head as the headache worsened, but he still put up with it as he glared back at her.

"Hmm, you are a stubborn person, indeed..." Sage noted, before she chuckled. "I like you. You've got spirit." At that point, she turned away from Brick, and the headache would in an instant vanish. "Anyone else want a demonstration?"

"I think you made your point Sunrise," Hunter said, folding his arms. He didn't really appreciate the things she did sometimes.

Brick was bewildered that the headache was gone, but somehow, an idea came to mind. He looked up at Sage. "Her memories are broken," he said, figuring that Sage would know who he was talking about. "Maybe if you tried to look into her mind, you might find the problem."

"Are you talking about Jill, Brick?" Striker asked.

"True..." Sage nodded, as she chuckled. "...but do you have a valid

reason as to *why* I should do that?"

"But-" Newt began, though Sage quickly interrupted him with another round of laughter.

"I kid, I kid." she chuckled. "I was actually thinking of paying that HQ a visit, just to see how Wiper's been doing."

"What about the Chaos Emerald?" Jack asked, as he looked at Sage. "Do you think we could have it, Miss Sage?"

"Isn't that a polite young boy..." Sage chuckled, as she looked away from the lion. "But I'll have to say no."

"How come?" Brick asked her.

"To be frank, I don't think you guys are suited to keep all of the emeralds safe." Sage replied, as she looked at Brick. "I'm not saying that you can't defend them, but from what I've seen, Metal Sonic is very ruthless; there's no telling what he could send after you, just to get one Chaos Emerald. He could even come after one personally."

" ***And what makes you more qualified to protect a Chaos Emerald than us?*** " Omega uttered, after having remained silent for the entire conversation.

"I have my ways." Sage chuckled, as she glanced at Hunter. "But that's not to say that we'll stop you from getting a different emerald. Right, Midnight?" she added with a brief wink.

Hunter ignored the wink, while he looked at Brick. "If you feel it's your responsibility to search for them, then we won't stop you," he said. "All I will tell you is that it is a harder task than you think."

"Heh, tell me about it."

The new voice would no doubt alarm them all. Milo jumped as he turned around, seeing a certain someone leaning against the wall behind him.

Callous.

Seeing her, Brick was utterly shocked, as he rose to his feet. "Wha?! You're-"

"If you're going to say what I think you are, lover boy, then you'll be mistaken," Callous chuckled.

While just about everyone glanced at Callous in surprise, Sage looked at her with a calm expression. "Callous, isn't it?" she said with a smile, as she turned to fully face her. "My, my, aren't you a naughty girl. Whatever do you want with us?" she said, the last part semi-mockingly; she knew perfectly well why Callous stood there.

"What makes you think I want something from you?" Callous replied, though she chuckled. "If only you had a real sense of humor."

"You're…Callous?!" Brick was amazed. She looked just like Jill only…

"Sure, I'd like that emerald," Callous finally said. "But who's to say I should get it right away? Maybe I'd like to chat and catch up."

"Well, if you want to chat, why not?" Sage chuckled, as she closed her eyes. "But I would prefer it if you wouldn't attempt to kill anyone here, Callous. At least not until we're done chatting."

"Is 't jus' me, or be she bein' overly casual about this?" Whisker noted, as he glanced at Newt and Natal.

"That's Sage for ya, y'know..." Newt uttered, as he kept his attention on Callous.

"Killing? Nah, Metal Sonic wouldn't like it if I finished off you all before he could," Callous said. "After all, he has dominance issues…oh, and another thing. I would be careful looking further into my mind Sunrise; you never know what you'll find." To this, Callous grew an evil smirk.

Hunter didn't like Callous one bit, and without realizing it, he stood up in front of Ani. This just made the little husky-wolf even more confused.

"Oh, I have no interest in reading into *your* mind, Callous." Sage

said with a chuckle. "I just pick up the easily-read, recent thoughts; it's not as straining for both parts, and I don't have to dig for any of them."

At that point, Jack tilted his head. "So... why do you look like Jill?" he asked out of curiosity.

"Oh, so they haven't told you little ones, did they?" Callous said.

"Told us what?" Striker asked, as he took out his aluminum bat. He had a bad feeling about this girl.

"I'm like a twin sister to your friend," Callous said. "Remember that scary little vampire? Well, he's my Daddy."

"He's y-y-your D-dad?!" Milo questioned.

"Wait..." Jack uttered, as he counted on his fingers. "So... if you're Jill's twin... and the bad vampire is your dad... then Jill's dad was a meany-face?!"

"Holy bilge water, that`s a frightenin' thought!" Whisker yelped, as he and Jack could only look at Callous in shock.

"I doubt it." Sage said, as she threw a glance at Brick. "According to him, she couldn't possibly be as naughty as Callous here." she added, before looking back at Callous. "So what is it? You're Jill's Metal Sonic, or something?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," Callous said, as her smirk grew. "Only, I'm more unpredictable than him."

"Unpredictable huh?" Hunter said, as his eyes started glowing. *Her power…I know this power from somewhere,* he thought. *It can't really be what I think it is, is it?!*

"What's wrong with you?" Ani asked Hunter.

"Oh, don't worry your sweet head over him, Ani." Sage chuckled, as she glanced at Callous. "Anyway, I do believe that my friend is beginning to tire of the chat. How about we call it a night, before someone gets hurt?"

Callous glanced at Hunter. *So…he recognizes Corruption,* she thought.

"So, that vampire created you?" Ani said. "Well, let me take the chance to say that vampires suck!"

"That's nice," Callous muttered apathetically, but once Callous glanced at Ani, she suddenly grew very interested in her. There was something about her that just rang in her senses, and sooner or later, she grew another smirk. "Well, well, well…" she chuckled. "What do we have here?"

"What? You don't like short kids?" Ani supposed, putting her hands on her hips. Just then, Hunter stepped in front of her, which caused Ani to try and look around him. "Hey!"

"Leave her alone," he growled menacingly at Callous.

Sage began losing her smile, as she looked from Hunter to Callous. "As I said, let's call it a night, honey, and no one will get hurt. Why not go home and tell Queen that Hunter and I said hi?" As she spoke, she began backing up, so that she stood right next to Ani, behind Hunter.

"Psh, fine," Callous grumbled. "I guess I can lie to Metal and tell him I didn't find anything…" Within an instant, Callous sunk through the ground, as she gave Ani one last smirk until she disappeared.

"…am I the only one that finds her creepy?" Brick suddenly said, once she was gone.

"Ha, chicken!" mocked Ani, as she started strutting around like a chicken.

"A-are you sure she left?!" Milo asked, as he hid behind Whisker along with Buddy.

"I dasn't know, an' frankly, I dasn't want t' stay here any longer t' find ou'!" Whisker replied, as he was hiding behind Omega, even as Milo and Buddy hid behind him.

" ***We are done here. Let us move on.*** " Omega agreed, as he

glanced at Sage, Hunter and Ani.

"...Midnight." Sage began, as suddenly, Ani would find herself floating up in the air, held by an unseen force. "You won't mind if I carry her, will you?" she asked.

"Holy crap!" Ani said, freaking out. "I can fly!"

"Ani, now I don't think I heard that kind of language from you before," Brick said, raising an eyebrow at her.

Ani shrugged. "Just the darnest things kids say! Now," she looked over at Sage. "Would you put me down?"

"...nope. Sorry." Sage shrugged, just as the feathery cape around her body opened up; as it turned out, it was a pair of large wings, which had concealed her body, the upper portion being bandaged. "I'll be going to visit Jill, now. I hope you can forgive me for bringing along little Ani, here." she chuckled, just as she began flapping her wings, taking to the sky, along with Ani.

"Wait a minute!" Ani said, though she couldn't do anything as the two of them flew away.

"If they're going back…" Rudy said. "…then what are we supposed to do?"

"We're going to hunt down another emerald," Hunter said, as he turned and started walking. "I will accompany you."

"Seriously?" Striker asked.

"Wha- really?!" Newt uttered, as he looked at Hunter in disbelief. "You mean... you're really going to help us out? No cheap tricks, or nuthin, y'know?"

"That sounds like a plan!" Jack said cheerfully, as he pumped his fist in the air. "Let's go find a Chaos Emerald!"

At that point, Omega glanced at Brick. " ***You still have the radar, right? Can you locate a different one?*** "

"Newt snatched it from me," Brick said, as he passed by Newt to take it back from his hands. "Anyhow, yeah…there's another one and it's…aw man."

"What?" asked Milo.

"Well…I think it's in a volcano…" Brick chuckled sheepishly.

"Oi, volcanoes..." Whisker groaned, as he held his head. "That`s gonna fry me whiskers off, fer sure."

At the HQ, Wiper sat on his own outside the building, calmly inspecting his shotgun. *...should I have told her about them?* he thought, before he closed his eyes. *...tsch, why am I thinking about this?*

If I were to guess, I'd say you're worried, Dawn.

Hearing a different voice in his head, Wiper suddenly opened his eyes, before bouncing to his feet. "What the... it can't be her?" he uttered, as he looked to the sky.

"Hey! I thought I told you to put me DOWN!" The second voice he heard could easily be recognized as Ani. No matter how much she struggled, she didn't have any success whatsoever trying to free herself from the force that held her.

Looking up at where this voice came from, Wiper nearly did a double-take. "I don't believe it... Sage?"

"Wiper. It's been a while." the guest announced, as the raven descended from the sky, flapping her wings until her feet hit the ground, just as Ani gently floated down on the ground next to her. "Seen Queen recently?"

"Whew…glad that's over," Ani sighed, as she wiped her brow.

Just then, the door opened, and Jill walked out. "Wiper, I thought I just heard Ani," she said. "Did they—" It was then that Jill stopped in her tracks when she saw Sage.

As Sage glanced at Jill, she chuckled. "You must be Jill." she said in a sort of motherly tone. "As I thought, nothing like her at all..."

"Ani, step away from her." Wiper said, as he kept his eyes on Sage. "I'll handle this." he added, before he began approaching the raven.

"Nothing like her?" questioned Jill. "What do you mean?"

"We saw her Jill!" Ani said. "She said her name was Callous and—!"

"What?!" Just then, Jill went up to Sage, lightly pushing Wiper aside. "Is this true?!"

"If you're talking about Callous, yes." Sage said with a nod, before chuckling. "Needless to say, she is everything you're not, Jill. And that is fortunate..."

"Quit playing around, Sunrise." Wiper hissed, as he glared at Sage. "What's your business around here?"

"Still the same as always... you know, telling your teammates about Dusk would have been a good thing, just so you know." Sage said, before looking down at Jill. "But never mind that; how are you feeling?"

"Who? Me, or him?" Jill asked, as she gestured to herself and Wiper.

"Take a wild guess." Sage responded with a chuckle.

"You still have a penchant for mind games, Sunrise..." Wiper uttered, before he glanced at Jill. "If you haven't figured it out yet, she is the former leader of Zeta; Sunrise, codenamed Sage."

"Oh," Jill looked at Sage. "…yeah, I feel alright now," she said, though she held her burned hand. "So you know what happened to me, huh?"

"Vaguely..." Sage uttered, as she closed her eyes. "...there, now I fully know."

"I should probably mention this..." Wiper said, as he looked at the

raven. "Sage is a master of psychokinesis and telepathy. Reading minds, lifting objects, you name it; she can do it."

"You flatter me." Sage chuckled, before she looked down at Jill. "Tell me; are you interested in a demonstration?"

"So, you can read minds?" Jill soon caught on to the idea expressed. "You mean…you can help me find out why my memories are all weird?"

"Exactly!" Ani said. "Brick asked her if she could do that!"

"So Brick asked you…" Jill murmured.

"He did so." Sage nodded. "But I should warn you; the process is tearing on both the body and mind. You need to be absolutely prepared for this, or your very psyche could be permanently damaged when I'm done."

"…I think I can handle it," Jill said nonchalantly.

Ani shot a look at her. "Jill! Didn't you hear her?!"

"Yeah, I heard her," Jill said, "but I think my psyche had been tested enough in the past. I can take it."

"Alright, let's see what we can do..." Sage said, as she slowly moved her hands towards Jill's head, her wings covering Jill's body from Wiper's and Ani's view. "Oh, and one more thing... it might sting a bit." she added, before placing her hands against Jill's head.

While it seemed like they were just standing in place for those around them, for both Jill and Sage, everything around them suddenly shattered, as both of them were left in a white, blank space, all on their own.

Jill looked around, though it didn't seem to faze her in the slightest. "Just wait a minute…" she said.

The white void soon faded, and the two of them will find themselves dispersed into a large stone chamber, filled with many stairways that led to countless doors. The style of the place though, matched that

of a medieval gothic church, with some stained glass windows here and there.

"I think the last time I was here, was when someone else tried to invade my mind," muttered Jill.

Sage hummed, as she looked around as well. "Really, now..." she uttered. "What took place in here?"

"I…I don't remember," Jill uttered. "But I was in this place, and there was someone else here. They were doing something…" she pressed some fingers to her temple, "…but I just can't remember what happened."

"You do remember." Sage said in a correcting tone, before looking down at Jill. "No memory is ever lost; it's only hidden. If you'll permit it, I could try digging a bit deeper, to see if we can't find it, but only if you're really prepared."

"I'm ready," Jill said with a nod.

"Alright. But this time, it's gonna do more than just a sting." Sage said, before she placed her hands against Jill's head again, though now, Jill would feel something brewing in her head; almost like a headache.

Jill winced, but she dealt with it. Sooner or later, Sage would suddenly see a door appear out of nowhere in a glow of light, somewhere near them. The door looked strange; it was black.

"...that door..." Sage uttered, as she closed her eyes, attempting to force the door open with her psychokinesis. "Maybe our answers lie there..."

The door opened to complete darkness, with black smog oozing out from the floor.

Be careful walking in there. It's pretty dangerous for a couple of girls like the two of you.

Jill jumped slightly, but she knew the voice and wasn't worried. "Well, you heard him," she said, as she approached the door.

"Hrm... ominous." Sage mused, as she followed Jill.

Chapter 17

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The moment the two crossed the doorway, the door slowly closed behind them, leaving them in the dark. Then they found themselves caught in a strange storm, which morphed into a scene.

The rain was pouring hard, and thunder roared in the sky. Two figures were standing on the battlefield; one was white with green wings and carried a holy blade.

Jill.

The other was a bat. He was garbed as if he was from the 17th century England, with long black wings, bandaged hands, and long white hair wrapped up in a ponytail. Seeing this figure, Jill shuddered.

"Deity Novagod," she uttered.

"Hm... he's certainly a looker." Sage noted, before she glanced at Jill. "Why are you two fighting?"

"For the longest time," Jill started, "this man has been bent on making my life as miserable as possible. He tortured and tormented me, and even haunted me in my nightmares…until this fateful fight…"

"Finally had it with him, I take it." Sage noted, as she looked back at the fight. "...where is Callous when this takes place? I would think that he's the one who made her in the first place, so..."

"Hold on…" Jill said, looking at the scene. "I think we might find out…"

The two of them didn't move.

"What is the matter?" Deity asked, as he eased from his fighter's

stance. "You're not fighting as fiercely as you usually do."

Needless to say, she was exhausted. Fairy Jill was huffing in the cold of the storm, covered in head to toe with bruises, burns, and cuts. She had a distraught look on her face. "Why?!" she uttered. "Why do you do this to me? What have I ever done to you?!"

"It's nerve-racking, isn't it?" Deity said, ignoring her question. "Not knowing anything…just trusting your instincts and taking leaps of faith."

"I'm sick of your mind-games Deity!" Fairy Jill screamed. "Why don't you ever tell me why you mess with me like this?!"

"Because," Deity said, as he walked up to her, "I don't need a reason to do what I do; I manipulate the weak-minded and gain only for myself. However, you prove to be someone else; someone special. I test you to see just how long you can last before you finally become another one of my victims…" As he opened his mouth, he revealed fangs.

Sage blinked. "So he's a vampire, now?" she uttered, as she folded her arms. "And here I thought Sunset being immortal was the strangest thing I'd see in my life..."

"I've seen stranger yet," commented the Jill beside Sage. "Deity doesn't consume blood however; he consumes energy. Chaos Energy to be precise."

"Keep dreaming!" yelled the Fairy Jill, as the grip around her sword tightened. "I'll never surrender myself to you! I'm making sure that all you did to me will end TODAY!" And that's when Fairy Jill charged forward after the vampire.

Regular Jill shook her head. "I was more reckless then…" she muttered.

Sage nodded. "You remind me of when I first learned of my psychokinesis... it wasn't a pretty sight, let me tell you that much." she said, with a bit of a shudder.

Jill and Sage watched the two harshly battle. They slashed at each

other with swords with blinding speed that the naked eye couldn't follow. Dirt flew everywhere, getting them dirty along with being drenched from the everlasting downpour of rain. Jill had a hard time watching this, remembering how hard it was, remembering that burning hate she had for Deity; which was the only thing at all that kept her going.

Then just as it came to a climatic slash between the two, everything fell silent. Fairy Jill and Deity stood on opposite sides of the field, standing absolutely still while awaiting the other to fall.

Sage could only gasp in awe, as she had been completely immersed in this duel. "...who fell?" she uttered.

Fairy Jill suddenly collapsed onto her knees, panting. A long black scar became visible across her chest, and she turned her head back to Deity. "Okay, you got me good…" she uttered. "…but I won't count my chickens before they hatch."

Deity started wheezing much more severely than Jill, while clutching his own chest. Similar to Jill, a scar was across his chest, but it was white and glowing; it also looked much deeper than Jill's wound. The bat stumbled to turn around, when he suddenly faced Fairy Jill, and she ran her sword into him.

"Unfortunately, I won't spare any mercy for you," Jill said. "The jig is up…"

Deity choked on his blood when she yanked her blade out of him, and after taking a few steps back, he fell on his knees, continuing to choke.

Despite the fact it was such a grotesque sight, Jill continued to watch. "This is when…" she uttered, trailing off. This was when her memories had started to go fuzzy, which is why Jill watched very intently.

Sage didn't say anything, as she kept watching the scene. *What's going to happen next?*

Fairy Jill raised her hands. The storm clouds above allowed a

parting up high, where a ray of bright light shined down upon the Fairy. Balls of energy descended down from the heavens, and the Fairy rose into the air, surrounded by this energy. Deity also rose, coated with a bright light that caused him to scream out in pain.

"You're lucky I can't make you suffer as much as I did!" Fairy Jill screamed, as some tears poured out of her angry eyes. "But I'll make sure you can't EVER harm anyone else!!!" Shooting the holy energies at Deity, he was consumed in a bright ball of light. It grew brighter, and brighter, and Deity's figure was no longer visible, as an invisible wave of force burst out, destroying the very ground.

Even if this was just a memory, Jill and Sage could feel it, as the impact hit them hard. Throughout it all though, Jill didn't flinch. She continued to watch in awe at the event that occurred before their very eyes.

As did Sage, who, despite being surprised at the impact, kept looking at the scene, waiting to see the aftermath of that blast.

Surprisingly enough, the blast died in an instant. The light faded, and revealed a brilliant-cut jewel object, which would look like a Chaos Emerald; only it was black.

"…this is when I sealed Deity away in that black emerald…" Jill spoke.

Fairy Jill fell to the ground, and tried to get onto her feet weakly. "I….I did it," the fairy muttered. More tears fell, as she smiled. "…I finally did it!" she uttered, crying tears of joy.

"Like you said, don't count your chickens before they hatch, girl!"

Fairy Jill had a hand snatch the back of her head and black energy surged through, making her cry painfully until she finally fell silently limp. When this happened, regular Jill's eyes widened, seeing the one who had done that. Callous stood over the fairy with a wide, evil smirk, cackling.

"You are a wonderful, generous person, dear," she chuckled. "You got rid of the most worthless scum on the Earth for me, and now I'm

free to roam around free as I please without a care in the world!"

"What?!" regular Jill uttered, as she watched this.

"...so, she..." Sage muttered, as she closed her eyes. "...I think I understand. The reason your memory was messed up... it was something she did. Naughty girl, as I guessed."

But Fairy Jill wasn't out and down for the count. The determined girl shook out of it, and got to her knees. "Callous," she said. "If you're free now, then you don't have any more business with me. You should just leave and claim your freedom."

"Why the cold shoulder, sis?" Callous asked, watching Fairy Jill actually get back onto her feet. "I figure that now we can have some more quality time toge—"

"I don't want to spend time with you anymore!" screamed Fairy Jill, interrupting Callous. "I want you to leave me alone!!!"

"Don't be so sour with me," Callous grumbled. Just then, there was a flicker in Callous eyes, and Fairy Jill's eyes soon had the same flicker.

"…you're right, I'm sorry," said Fairy Jill, as he sighed.

This surprised regular Jill even more.

"...that is surprising." Sage noted, as she folded her arms. "Just what did that naughty girl do to you...?"

"No…" Jill uttered, shaking her head in denial. "No, she couldn't have…" Jill looked at Sage. "Deity tore a chunk of my soul in order to create Callous. This means that she's connected to me…" then Jill looked back at her. "…and I finally remembered that she can manipulate my emotions, which ultimately control my thoughts."

"Now just relax," Callous said soothingly, as she walked up to Fairy Jill. "You had a big day." Then she put a hand to the fairy's cheek. "Why don't you just *sleep?"* she uttered, as another flicker came from her eyes and passed onto Jill's.

At first, the Fairy said nothing as she trembled. Then, her eyes closed, and the fairy collapsed onto the ground without another sound. Callous then knelt down beside her, and placed her hand on her head, as it emitted black energy. Then she chuckled, "now, I'm sure you won't mind me just tinkering with your mind…maybe you'll thank me for it. After all, you won't be able to remember much of anything, which means it won't be as painful as it was."

"…I guess you were right Sage," regular Jill said.

"...why would she do that, though?" Sage mused, as she scratched her chin. "She couldn't want to do it in the name of the vampire; she just said that with him out of the picture, she was free to do whatever she wanted. Perhaps it was for personal gain...?"

"Who knows why Callous did it," Jill said. "But I think she did something to lock my powers away too…which leaves me wondering—" Jill cut off, as the two of them would suddenly feel an invisible force pull them back. Before Jill could look to see what it was, something whisked them up and took them back quickly…

…just in time to fly out the door they had entered into before, and the minute they hit the floor of the chamber, the black door shut and vanished.

Sage gave out a huff, as she rubbed her head. "Hmph, talk about a rude sendoff." she muttered, as she folded her arms. "I hate it when memories decide to eject you like that... so, Jill, would you say that we are done?"

"…I don't know," Jill said, when she got back to her feet. "I want to find out how my powers came back, if Callous did something to lock them away, and I don't think there's anything in my memories that will help me, but…"

She peered around, as if she was looking for something. "I have a feeling we aren't done yet, for some reason…"

Suddenly, another door appeared before them. When Jill saw it though, her eyes widened. "…Oh my god," she said. "I recognize this door."

Jill remembered her dream about the church with that stained glass window…these were the double doors that had led into it.

Sage blinked, as she looked at the door. "Really?" she said, as she got to her feet, looking at it. "Shall we take a look at what's behind it, then?" she added, as she closed her eyes, attempting to open the door with her powers, like with the black door from before.

The doors opened, and just like Jill figured, they led into the small chapel. When they walked inside, the doors closed behind them like last time. Jill looked around at this place. "…I swear, this must be in my subconscious or something," she said. "I had a dream about this place…"

"Well, it shouldn't be a surprise to you, then." Sage said, as she looked around. "How do you think I'm able to even get us to your memories? It's one thing to read minds, but it's another to dive into them."

"Hey, nice of the two of you to drop by!"

Jill jumped, and turned up past the pews. Up on the platform, two figures were standing there; one standing and the other leaning against the wall. The light from the stained glass window above hid them in the shadows, but the one that was standing walked forward into view. "Heh, it's not often we get visitors," said a certain blue hedgehog.

"…Sonic?!" Jill blinked as she rubbed her eyes, just to make sure her eyes weren't playing tricks.

"Well, we're not exactly in the physical world anymore, so that's likely a given." the other figure said, as he stepped into view as well. "Though, more than one this time around?" the black hedgehog inquired.

"...I don't believe it. That's... Sonic and Shadow." Sage uttered, as she looked genuinely shocked. *Her subconscious... is it linked to the afterlife, or something?* she thought, as she glanced at Jill.

"What are you two doing here?" Jill asked, as she started walking up

past the pews toward them.

Sonic chuckled, as he rubbed his nose. "What do you mean by that?" he asked. "We're in your head, so you'd know the answer to that question."

Jill stopped, and realized suddenly that he was right. "You mean… you have some answers?"

"Well, we're no encyclopedia or anything," Sonic said with a shrug.

"I'd suppose that if you ask the right questions, we might just have an answer for it." Shadow shrugged, as he glanced down at Sage. "...hm. Now I get it. One of GUN's former agents."

Sage reeled back a bit when she heard that comment, but shrugged it off, as she followed Jill up to the hedgehogs.

"Sonic…do you know how I got my powers back?" Jill asked.

Sonic grinned. "Straight to the point aren't'cha? Let's see…" Sonic put a finger to his lips thoughtfully. "I guess the shortest answer to give you is that we might have had something to do with your powers coming back."

"You? As in…you and your friends?" Jill asked.

Jill felt a strange tingle, and when she turned around, she discovered something else; a pink hedgehog in a red hoopskirt, who smiled at her, and then, that familiar red echidna, and the orange one. Then a white bat that was perched up high out of sight, until she fluttered down by her dark purple bat weren't the only ones who Jill noticed either. A green crocodile, a purple chameleon and a red-shelled armadillo were also amongst the crowd, smiling.

"Incredible..." Sage uttered, as she looked at all the characters she instantly recognized. "In all my years as a psychic... this leaves me speechless."

"I would guess that they began their handiwork around the time we got the first Chaos Emerald." Shadow said. "Though, it really began showing after Metal dealt that last blow to me..."

Jill turned back to Sonic and Shadow. "Why?" she asked. "Why help me?"

"Because Jill," said Sonic, "Your Purity has a connection to Chaos, which means not only do you really stand a chance of making sure Metal-Head doesn't get out of line, but you're basically taking over for us, along with all your friends."

The pink hedgehog, which Jill knew was Amy, walked forward. "Besides," she said. "We're waiting for our friends before we all go to the afterlife together."

"You mean…the Professor, and Grandma Cream, and Captain Charmy?" Jill asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be fair to let 'em go on their own, would it?" the crocodile, who'd be recognized as Vector, chimed in.

"We're prepared to wait for however long it's going to take." the chameleon, or Espio, said, as he folded his arms.

"Yeah; leave no man behind, as they say!" the armadillo, or Mighty, said with an enthusiastic grin.

"To tell you the truth, I was surprised to see everyone waiting for me when I passed on..." Shadow said, as he happened to glance at the bat. "But in a good way."

"Well, you'd be surprised how strong friendship is sometimes," remarked the bat known as Rouge with a chuckle. "No matter how corny it sounds…"

"Anyhow, don't worry about everything that'll happen Jill," Sonic said. "Just don't lose sight of hope, and make sure that your friends don't lose hope either…"

There was a sudden flash of light…

…and then, Jill and Sage would break away from each other, which jumped Ani.

"Whoa!" she said. "For a minute, I thought we'd have to do

something to wake you guys up!"

Sage was utterly stunned, as she stepped away from Jill. In silence, she could only look at the ewe.

"...what's going on?" Wiper hissed, as he glanced at Jill. "Sage's never been that distressed in her whole life. Just what happened, Jill?"

Jill didn't answer Wiper right away. She stepped forward to Sage. "Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"...you..." Sage uttered, before she turned away. "I'm... I'm fine, don't worry about me," she laughed nervously. "It's just... I've never seen anything like that in my entire life. I'm just shaken, is all."

After a while, she turned her head to look at Jill. "What do you intend to do?" she asked.

Jill just looked at Sage, and then she answered. "I intend to do what I need to do," she said, "and that's to stop Metal not only from accomplishing his goal of world domination, but to save him from making a grave mistake that could endanger everyone."

"What mistake is that Jill?" Ani asked, tilting her head.

"…accidentally releasing Deity Novagod from the black emerald," Jill said.

"...I see." Sage said with a nod, as she looked away. "...I'll be going now; your friends must be on their way after another emerald." she said, as she spread her wings out.

"Sage." Wiper suddenly shot in, as he glanced at the raven. "...are you still with..."

"No, me and Hunter left King. He's with Miser and Ripper, now." Sage said, as she began flying off. "And one more thing, Jill! You should keep little Ani there away from Callous; her father wouldn't be happy if something happened to her!"

"Father?!" both Jill and Ani uttered.

"What do you mean father?!?!" questioned Ani. "My parents died when I was a baby!" but seeing as Sage had flown off, it was too late to get an answer.

"...that's Sage for you." Wiper muttered, as he folded his arms. "To be honest, I'm glad that she's not with King. I didn't get along with him at all..." Then, he glanced at Ani. "But she said something about Callous showing interest in you. Why do you suppose that is?"

"No clue, but the chick ran away when that Hunter guy and Sage told her to leave!" Ani said.

Jill only looked at Ani. Callous, to be honest, was hardly interested in anything, except messing with minds and causing trouble….

…or something having to do with Corruption.

Jill didn't understand why she didn't see it before, but somehow for some reason, she did. She sensed something strange about Ani that was too hard to describe, and she wasn't sure if it was something to be alarmed about or not. So Jill decided to keep it to herself. "Not anything I know about," Jill said.

"Hm, I see..." Wiper muttered, as he glanced in the direction Sage had flown off to. "In any case, we should keep Ani out of trouble; if Callous has shown interest in her, it'd be better to keep the two as far away from each other as possible."

"Hey, that'll mean I can't emerald hunt with the rest of them!" said Ani angrily.

"I'm afraid so," Jill said. "Sorry Ani."

"Jill! Wiper!" The door burst open and Cream ran out. "Please hurry! I'm not sure how long Tails and Charmy will keep her under control!"

"What's wrong?!" Jill asked.

"It's Boomer!" she said frantically. "There's something wrong with her!"

"What?!" Hearing that, Wiper quickly rushed past Cream, into the

house. *It has to be the Corruption. But how did it happen?!* he thought.

Jill looked serious and followed closely after Wiper inside, knowing full well what it was about. Once Ani followed too, the four of them could hear disturbing screams coming from down the hall.

Gritting his teeth, Wiper very nearly broke into a run until he would eventually reach the scene. *Just what happened to cause a reaction like that?*

"Boomer, please!" Charmy said, while trying to approach her, but the duck swatted him away, slapping him in the process.

"NO!" she screamed. "GET AWAY!!!" When Jill arrived, she noticed two particular things about Boomer. One: her eyes were shut, and Two: something black was crawling up the back of her neck. This alarmed her even more.

"Jill and Wiper! Thank goodness!" said Charmy, rubbing his check at where Boomer had slapped him. "Boomer started screaming in her sleep so we assumed she had a nightmare, but when we tried to wake her up, she started acting up like this!"

On cue, Boomer slammed her fists repeatedly into the wall as she screamed hysterically. "DON'T HURT ME!!!" she cried, knocking over a nearby end table which startled Cream and Ani a great deal. Then she clutched her head and continued to scream.

"...she's still asleep?" Wiper uttered, as he observed her. "She might be having a nightmare, and the wound Callous gave her... Jill, you can do something about it, right?" he asked, as he glanced at the ewe.

"I can," Jill said, "but she has to hold still! Ani!"

"On it!" Ani said, as she held out her hand. Next thing Boomer knew, she was pinned on the wall by blue telekinetic energy, and even then, the duck tried to struggle.

"NO, I'M BEGGING YOU!!!" she pleaded.

"Ani, flip her over so I can take a look at her back!" Jill instructed over her loud screams. When Ani did so, Jill took the buckles of Boomer's overalls and took them off, looking at her bare back. Black energy was bubbling out of a black scar across her back, and it was crawling like ooze that was alive.

"My god..." Tails uttered as he looked at this. "Just what is this?"

"It's the Corruption; definitely from the wound Callous gave her." Wiper hissed, before giving Jill a nod. "Hurry up; the faster you get it under control, the better."

After nodding back at Wiper, Jill placed a hand on the back of Boomer's head, and closed her own eyes. "Boomer! If you can hear me, I want you to calm down!" Jill ordered.

Boomer suddenly stopped screaming, but her eyes were still shut, and it was clear that she was still very scared as she shuddered severely. It would probably surprise everyone in the room.

"Jill?" Charmy uttered in disbelief.

"Boomer, I need you relax…" Jill said, lowering her voice now. "… think of something soothing."

Boomer stopped shuddering, and somehow took deep breaths, even if she was still asleep. Jill coated her hand with a lot of green Purity energy, adding layer after layer which would be necessary for what she was about to do. Then she set that hand in the center of the wound, and the moment it touched, there was a loud sizzle as the ooze stopped advancing on Boomer.

Though everyone was silent in looking at this procedure, Wiper was more or less neutral, as he observed this. *So... this is what happens when Corruption attempts to overtake a body.* he thought.

Jill winced. It hurt her as she did this, but it was successful dispelling the Corruption from her wound. The ooze soon sizzled away to nothingness, leaving just a simple burn on Boomer's back, but at least it was just that. Boomer stopped altogether, and suddenly opened her eyes. "Huh?" she murmured, blinking.

Jill finally retreat her hand, as Ani set Boomer onto her feet, and she looked at the others. "…what happened?" she asked, holding her head.

Wiper glanced at Jill for a quick moment, before he cleared his throat. "You were having a nightmare, and from the looks of it, it was quite the experience." he said.

"What?" Boomer asked, though when she noticed Wiper looking at Jill, she looked at Jill too out of curiosity. There were burnt marks on her other hand now, and Jill looked at it solemnly. "Wait, you mean…"

"The Corruption from your wound was starting to take effect on you," Jill said. "But don't worry; it won't happen again now that I got rid of it for you…"

"Though, I do have to wonder..." Wiper muttered, as he looked at Boomer. "Just what caused it to begin overtaking her like that in the first place?"

"I…" Boomer turned away from them to hide her hurt expression. "… I remembered the destruction that the GUN base suffered…well, it was madness. Everything was being destroyed by the same powerful force and I tried to stop it, but…it was too strong. It finally came for me, and I panicked…"

"I see," Charmy said. "Boomer, why don't you go ahead and go back to sleep? I'm sure you'll be fine now that Jill took care of things."

"…yes sir," Boomer replied, rubbing her eyes as she left the room.

Wiper watched Boomer leave the room, before he gave out a sigh. "It must be hell." he muttered, as he closed his eyes.

"…You have no idea," Jill remarked, looking at Wiper.

Lava. Hot, boiling lava, which was just right below their feet as they traversed down the ledge of the inside of the mountain.

"Man, it's HOT in here!" complained Rudy, as he tried to air out his sweatshirt.

"You`re tellin' me, matey." Whisker complained as well. "I feel like I be gettin' some kind o' cabin fever 'ere..."

" ***Despite the fact that you are a machine.*** " Omega quipped.

"Fascinating..." Natal mused, as she looked down at the lava, instead of complaining about the heat.

"You like this sorta stuff, or what, Natal?" Newt muttered, before he glanced towards Brick. "Yo, we gettin' any stronger signals, y'know?"

"Almost," Brick said. "Just a bit farther."

"Hey, Mr. Hunter," said Milo, tugging at him. "Why were you so protective over Ani, and why did Sage take her away?"

The wolf remained silent, almost seeming to ignore the little lion. Then when he looked down at Milo with his scars and blind eye, it scared Milo to look the other way.

As the group advanced, Omega couldn't help but look around, and after a while, Whisker began doing so as well. Noticing this, Newt looked at the two robots. "What's up?" Newt asked.

"I dasn't know... but I think I heard somethin'." Whisker said, as he folded his arms.

" ***We may be followed. I suggest that we get a move on.*** " Omega chimed in.

"I hear it too," Hunter remarked. "Brick, how much farther?"

"There it is!" Brick said with a point. That would direct all gazes at the top of a high boulder. It was apparent that the only way to get to it would be to climb the boulder.

"Up there?" Jack said, as he cracked his neck. "First to the top!" Laughing, he quickly began scaling the boulder, before anyone

could stop him.

Omega eventually stopped looking around, before glancing in one direction, keeping his arms trained on that area. " ***It's coming from there... some form of laughter?*** "

Indeed, most of the group would begin hearing an eerie laughter coming from the shades. "...kekekekeke..."

Hunter recognized it, and immediately went up after Jack. "Jack, wait!" he snarled.

Blinking, Jack looked down at Hunter. "What's wrong?" he asked, though at that moment...

"KEKEKEKEKEKE!!!" Out from the shadows, behind the group, a massive figure lunged at the closest member of the group; namely, Omega. Thankfully, the robot was quick to cross his arms, blocking an attack from two scythe-like blades. "Kekeke! You're huge, but you have no guts!"

As it turned out, the assailant was a large praying mantis, with a sinister grin plastered over his face, and in place of two regular arms, he had six, the four upper-most replacing the hands with scythe-like blades. To Hunter, Newt and Natal, the mantis would immediately be recognized as Epsilon's former leader; Ripper.

"Damn it!" Hunter roared when he saw him. In blinding swiftness, he leaped up to grab Jack and reached the top of the boulder. "Stay here!" he instructed Jack. "Find that emerald!"

"Uh... okay?" Jack uttered, as he couldn't help but glance at the impending fight, before he began searching for the emerald.

Then with that, he leaped back down. "Ripper! What do you want?!" he roared.

"That's Ripper?!" Brick asked.

"Milo! C'mon!" said Striker, as he pulled the lion to climb onto the boulder after Jack.

"Kekekeke! You should know, old friend!" Ripper laughed, as he and Omega separated from one another, with the mantis swinging his scythe-arms around. "King is forgiving, you know! He wants you and Sage to come back and help him in his plot of military dominance, so he sent me and Miser around to find you guys!"

After a short while, Ripper licked one of the blades, glancing at the others in the group. "He also told me specifically not to kill you or Sage... but he never said anything about anyone in your company! Kekekekeke, this will be a bloodbath!"

"Like hell you will!" yelled Brick. "You lay one of those blades on the kids, and you'll be asking for an ass-whooping!"

As Ripper cackled manically, Omega suddenly aimed his arms at the mantis. " ***I won't allow anything of the sort.*** " he uttered.

"Aye!" Whisker chimed in, as he stepped up right next to Omega. "If ye want a piece o' our comrades, ye`ve got t' tear through us, first!"

"Brick said a bad word…" uttered Milo, as he, Striker and Buddy climbed up the boulder after Jack.

Hunter joined the group, as he drew out his dagger. "Tell King he can forget about it. If he wants to control others, then he's no different then GUN."

"Kekekekekeke!" Ripper cackled, as he began swinging his blades around menacingly. "You can tell him yourself, Midnight!" he said, as he slowly began advancing towards the group. "Of course, I couldn't care less if he succeeds with his ambitions or not... as long as I can kill, kill, KILL!!!" he yelled, as his sadistic smirk turned into a full-on psychotic grin.

" ***That's enough.*** " With a sudden movement, Omega's hands turned into a pair of gatling guns, which immediately began firing upon Ripper. However, somehow, Ripper swung his blades quickly enough to knock away just about every shot aimed his way.

"Kekekekeke! That's it! Make this more exciting!" Ripper laughed, as he kept up his advancing.

"You're right, he IS crazy!" said Brick, as he watched Ripper.

"I bet he isn't crazy enough," said another voice. From thin air, a white figure popped out, bearing two katanas. It turned out to be Cal, and he had himself a pair of new katanas, twice as long as the previous ones that Natal now possessed.

"Not you too!" yelled Brick.

"Kekekeke! More to the slaughter, then?!" Ripper cackled, as he suddenly leapt over Omega's hail of gunfire, before aiming in on Cal without hesitation, slashing two of his blades at him. "This could be fun!"

"Unbelievable..." Natal uttered, as she drew all of her swords, including her nodachi, which she held with her elongated tongue.

"He's just like the stories told of him; he just wants to kill, and he doesn't care who it is, y'know!" Newt said, before he raised his fists; as luck would have it, he hadn't brought any of his heavy weapons with him while looking for the emerald, not having expected this kind of resistance.

Cal easily repelled Ripper's blades with his own katanas. "I hear that bugs can cook like an egg in lava," Cal remarked. "After all, I don't intend to fail Metal."

"Kekekeke! Isn't it the same for little chimps like yourself?!" Ripper cackled, as he began upping the ante, beginning to swing all four of his blades at Cal.

Damn it Sage, get here soon! Hunter thought, as he watched Cal and Ripper duel.

Finally, Milo and Striker got to the top and found that there was a mouth to a cave that Jack had gone down. "Hey Jack, wait for us!" Striker called. Rudy simply leaped over the tall height and landed right beside Milo and Buddy, scaring them to death. Then Rudy hopped down the cave.

"Hold up Jack!" he called, just as the rest of them followed.

Meanwhile, down in the cave, Jack was casually walking through the rocky insides, once in a while jumping over some boulders obscuring the path. "Where's the emerald...?" he mused to himself.

All up until Rudy was the first to catch up with Jack, hopping onto his back. "Piggy-back ride!" he exclaimed.

"Piggy-back? Alright!" Jack laughed, as he kept on walking through the cave, occasionally looking around him to observe some of the scenery. "This place is pretty neat, isn't it, Rudy?" he asked as the two kept advancing downwards.

"It's awesome!" Rudy said. "I never thought I'd be on an adventure like this! It's like we're a team of superheroes!"

"Superheroes? That sounds awesome!" Jack laughed, just as he noticed something in the distance; something like a clearing. "Hey, I think we're getting close!"

"Really?" Rudy asked.

"Jack, Rudy, please wait for us!" If Jack turned around, Milo, Striker and Buddy would be running up and when they reached the two, they stopped to catch their breath.

"Oh, you guys are here!" Jack laughed, before he looked towards the clearing. "I think the emerald's in there. What do you guys think?"

"Oh good," sighed Milo with relief. "I'm ready to find it and go home…"

"Let's hope it's up there," Striker said, as he walked ahead.

As the group walked into the clearing, they would see a much clearer and wider room, with another entrance on the other side of the room, and a small crater in the center of the room. And in the crater lied... "A Chaos Emerald!" Jack said, as he walked towards the cyan gemstone.

"Yes!" Striker said, as he followed Jack.

"Wow…it's pretty," Milo commented when he saw it.

Laughing, Jack picked up the emerald, before being absolutely awestruck when he looked at it up-close. "Wow... I can't wait until the others see this!" he said with a smile, as he turned around towards where they had entered, when all of a sudden, they heard footsteps... coming from the other entrance.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what is that?!" Milo asked, quivering behind Striker.

"Ch-ch-ch-ch-chao?!" Buddy added.

Jack blinked, as he looked towards the entrance, as the footsteps got closer and closer.

Chapter 18

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eventually, a figure stepped out from the entrance; a female rhino, with a pair of horns jutting out where her nose would have been, wearing a brown, open trench coat over her body, with what appeared to be a railgun on her back. "...who are you?" she said in a somber tone.

"I don't know if we should say," Striker said. "We were told it wasn't a good idea to talk to strangers..."

"...I see." the rhino said, as she began walking towards them. "It's rude of me, not to introduce myself first. My name... well, I don't really have a name. But I'm called Miser. What about you?"

"Y-you're Miser?!" Milo whimpered, remembering what he heard from Newt and Hunter.

"Are you going to do anything to hurt us?" Striker asked.

Hearing that, Miser got a very guilty expression. "I'm sorry." she said quickly. "I didn't mean to scare you... but don't worry. I never harm children. No, I came here, looking for friends of mine... you haven't seen them, have you?"

"That really scary guy, Ripper, he came and starting attacking us for no reason!" blurted Milo.

"Hold on Milo," Striker said. "I think she means that she's looking for Hunter and Sage."

Rudy hopped off from Jack's back and hopped up to Miser. "Hunter's back there," he said with a point. "But Sage took off, saying she was going to visit our friend Jill and she took our other friend Ani with her."

"So, Hunter is here..." Miser said, before she sat down on the floor,

sighing. "And Ripper, as well... these days have been quite hectic. It is a dreary thing to think about... how I miss the times of old..." As she spoke, she eventually folded her arms. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have begun reminiscing about the past... but in any case, would you indulge me with your names?"

Jack blinked, before he pointed his thumb at himself. "I'm Jack the Lion!" he said with a smile.

"Uh…I'm Striker," said the bear cub, and then he gestured to the two hiding behind him. "Their names are Milo and Buddy."

"I'm Rudy!" said the kangaroo, hopping excitedly.

"Those are great names." Miser said, as she managed a small smile, before she stood up, looking at the kids. "...childhood." she eventually said, before walking past the kids, towards the entryway they had come down from. "Live it out to the fullest, and don't waste it... like we were forced to."

"What?" Rudy didn't fully understand that, but they watched as she walked out.

"You're as energetic as ever Ripper," remarked Cal, as he was standing on a lone platform that rose out of the sea of lava.

"Kekekekekeke! I'm just getting started!" Ripper cackled, as he leapt after Cal on the platform, wildly slashing his blades at the monkey.

"..so, be he eregettin' t' us?" Whisker said, as the group had basically been reduced to a stage audience for the fight between Cal and Ripper.

"At this point, I think the two are pretty occupied with themselves," Brick said. "The kids will grab that emerald and we can leave the two of them to their—!"

Just then, Hunter shoved Brick out of the way. Before the bull could respond, a wave of black energy flew right over the two of them, and it even headed towards Cal and Ripper, splitting the platform

between them and separating them.

"Don't think that you all get off easily," Callous chuckled, as she approached the group.

Seeing her, Cal took a break from Ripper as he leaped away from the platform to another one.

"Keke?" Ripper uttered, as he glanced at Callous. "My, oh my, more to slay! Kekekeke, that's how to do it!"

"You!" Suddenly, both Newt and Natal turned to face Callous, and while both of them looked nervous, they still got in battle-ready positions. "What the hell do you want with us, y'know?!" Newt uttered spitefully.

Callous didn't answer. She started off in a run, leaping over the group and onto a platform in the river of lava. "Cal, why don't you take a break from him and get yourself an emerald?" she said.

Cal simply nodded, as he hopped up in the air with his jet pack.

"No!" If Cal went after that emerald, there's no telling whether or not he'd hurt the gang, so Brick ran after the monkey and managed to snatch him by his feet as he was carried along. With this, Cal tried to kick the bull off, but Brick held on tightly. "You're NOT going to hurt them!"

"So sorry to burst your bubble Ripper," Callous said playfully, as she encountered the mantis, "but unfortunately, I can't be killed."

"...you can't?" Ripper uttered, before he began laughing. "Kekekekekeke! You're like Miser? She can't die, either!" Then, he suddenly crossed both pairs of his blades. "I don't bother with things that don't bleed, so move along! Kekekeke!"

As Cal attempted to kick Brick away, however, all of a sudden, a massive electrical burst of energy, somehow undetectable, to boot, was sent rushing right in Cal's direction, threatening to hit him head-on.

In a short second, Cal lifted Brick to position him in the way, allowing

the beam of energy to hit him instead. It was sheer luck, as Cal didn't know about the beam, but once it shot down Brick from his grip, Cal went ahead and took off flying in the direction where the kids had been presumably.

"DAMN IT!" Brick screamed, though once he hit the ground, he couldn't utter anything as he was in too much pain.

"Shit," growled Hunter. Seeing that, he drew his dagger, and it became coated with blue telekinetic energy. Then, it was shot through the air. It struck Cal right into his back, causing the monkey to screech as he hit the floor.

Callous saw this, and simply grunted. "Men are weak…" Without another warning, she whipped out her powerful dark scythe from the air, and jolted forward slashing Ripper.

However, the scythe only connected with Ripper's personal scythe-blades, as the mantis laughed. "Kekekeke! Finally decided to show up, Miser?" he cackled, as he took a swipe at Callous, for the hell of it.

As it turned out, the one who had fired that beam was Miser, holding the massive railgun in her hands, while standing over Cal, looking pitifully at him. "Using someone as a human shield... and I thought one couldn't stoop lower than monsters like Metal Sonic." she said in a disappointed and still sad tone.

Cal gritted his teeth, while electricity sparked from his back where the dagger stabbed him. Hunter pinned his foot down on Cal, making sure he didn't move. Then he looked right at Miser. "Good seeing you again Miser," he said. "I appreciate the help."

Brick tried to crawl onto his own feet, while his attention was swayed to Callous and Ripper, where Callous deflected his swipe effortlessly. "You know, I think I met some friends of yours," she said. "Wiper and Queen, I believe."

"Kekekekeke! Really?" Ripper laughed, as he kept swinging his blades at Callous. "How are those two holding up? I thought Queen was dead, but if she ain't, King's gonna be really happy! But what do

I care for that?! Kekekekekekeke!"

Miser glanced at the battle as well, before looking at Hunter, giving him a nod. "I assume that you and Sage still won't come back to King, my friend. A shame, it is, that we'll be forced to split apart soon..."

"Unfortunately so," Hunter replied to Miser. "I have my own duties to attend to…now that I found out my daughter is alive and well."

Callous' ear caught that, and she couldn't help but smirk. However, she kept it to herself, as she couldn't leave Ripper in the dust. "Queen's just peachy," she said to him. "But I don't know how much longer Wiper might last!"

"What, did you do something to him?" Ripper assumed, as he cackled manically. "Kekekekeke! He may not look like it, but he's one of the toughest of us! And I doubt that he'll be gone until King gets to talk to him!"

Hearing that, Newt blinked, as he glanced at Miser and Hunter. "Don't tell me..."

With a simple nod, Miser looked at Hunter again. "King told us that he would give Wiper a personal visit while me and Ripper searched for you and Sage. I hope you can understand; despite Wiper abandoning the rebellion, King still sees him, you and Sage, as close friends."

"Well, well, old friends having a reunion?" Callous said. "Actually, now that you mention it, I *did* do something to him. I don't think he'll be in the best of health when your friend goes to visit him."

"Wait a minute," Hunter said, eying Callous sharply. "…There's Corruption building up in him, isn't there?!" he suddenly blurted, which would surprise everyone.

"Ah, so you knew of its power after all," Callous chuckled.

"Corruption?" Miser repeated, as she looked curiously at Hunter. "What's wrong? What is going to happen to Wiper?"

"I couldn't care less if I wanted to!" Ripper shot in, as he began slashing at Callous again. "If you won't bleed, then scram!"

Brick put his finger to his earpiece, and carried his self away from the group to make sure he wasn't heard. "Wiper…" he uttered. "… we've got a huge problem."

Finally, at the top of the large boulder, Rudy arrived to see the scene, and he jumped. "HOLY TOLDEO!" he said. "It's that scary Callous lady from earlier!"

Following Rudy was Jack, who could only look at the fight between Callous and Ripper in awe. "Woah... awesome fight scene!"

"What sort of problem?" Wiper responded from the other side. " *Did you encounter any of Metal's cronies?"*

"Cal and Callous…" Brick croaked. "…and then this Ripper guy, and this Miser, only Miser seems much more polite then that crazed mantis…and they say that this King is coming to visit you."

"You know," Callous said, as she suddenly took the blades with her own hands, ignoring the fact that the blades dug into her palms making them bleed, "I'm getting fed up with you." Then Ripper would see something black and gooey crawling across his blades.

Hunter's eyes widened, "No…"

"...he is? Hmph... I'll alert Jill about it. As for you... get everyone out of there."

"RIPPER!" Suddenly, Miser aimed her railgun at Callous, charging it up. "You leave my comrade alone, or I'll-"

"Hey, hey, hey, now, no need to become violent, Callous!" Before anyone could react, Callous was pulled away from Ripper by an unseen force, leaving the mantis to quickly attempt to shake the black mass away from his blades. "Naughty, naughty girl. That is one of my friends you tried messing with."

"That voice..." Ripper uttered, as he looked up, grinning. "Kekekekeke! Took you long enough, Sage!"

As it turned out, Sage was flying up in the sky, keeping her eyes completely focused on Callous. "You may not want me to read your mind, but you can't stop me from moving you, Callous."

"Thank god…" Hunter said.

"Brick, are you okay?!" asked Striker, as he, Milo and Buddy made their way down the boulder quickly when they saw him.

"Yeah, I'm alright," Brick said. Then he turned to his earpiece. "Wiper, Sage just made it back, and the kids have an emerald in their grasp."

"Listen," Callous said, deciding to ignore the fact that Sage had her. "Why don't we all just take this to Chaotix HQ? I can even go back and get little ol' Queen for you so all of you can have your little reunion properly…"

Callous, what are you doing now? Thought Cal, rolling his eyes.

"Kekekekeke! Don't think you can weasel your way outta this mess!" Ripper cackled, before he looked up at Sage. "You got her! Now destroy her mind! Kekekekeke!"

"I don't think that'd kill her, Ripper..." Sage mused, as he looked at the group down below. "...really, now. King's visiting? He'd hate for any of us to disturb him, if he's going to talk to Wiper on his own." Then, she looked at Callous. "Didn't I tell you that you could go and greet Queen from us? Go home now, before anyone gets hurt." she said, before giving Hunter a subtle nod.

Callous, true to her word surprisingly, calmly sauntered over to Hunter, Miser and Cal as Hunter took his foot off the cyber monkey. Then she yanked out the dagger in his back, making Cal screech a bit. "Here, I believe this is yours," she said, handing Hunter the dagger, who took it with some hesitance. Then she picked Cal up onto his feet, while the two of them sunk beneath the ground and disappeared.

Hunter looked at Sage then. "Sage, we have to get back to the Chaotix HQ! Wiper has Corruption in his system!"

"That's not any problem…" Brick was being helped by Striker and Milo as he walked to Hunter and Miser.

"He has? He didn't seem to be abnormally affected by it." Sage mused, as she flew closer to the group. "So, are we all going back? It'll take a little longer if I have to carry all of you."

"Kekekekeke! It'll be like a family reunion!" Ripper cackled, as he did a tremendous leap towards the group, landing next to Miser. "What are we waiting for? Take us away!"

" ***Wouldn't it be more convenient for Sage if the smaller figures here were carried by the larger figures?*** " Omega suggested, as he and Whisker joined the group, as did Jack and Rudy, eventually.

"That sounds like a good plan," Brick said, as he suddenly collapsed onto the ground.

"Brick!" Milo cried, with Buddy adding a "Chao!"

"…King's coming," Jill said. "…do you know if they're okay?"

"Brick said that Sage arrived just after I told them to get out of there, so they should be safe." Wiper responded, before he leant against a wall, calmly hissing. "But I have to wonder... how the hell did King find out that I was here?"

"I don't know," Jill said. "But I do know that if they're coming to see you…it might trigger that Corruption in your body."

"How do you figure?" Wiper inquired, as he glanced at Jill. "If I'm not mistaken, the Corruption only triggers due to intense emotional stress. And one of the things that were practically pounded into us from day one was that we would never let our emotions affect our judgment. I doubt I'd get more than a little annoyed at seeing King again."

"Wiper," Jill said worriedly. "It's more to it then just that. If you contain any amount of Corruption, it'll start to mess with you. Sure, it's triggered when you feel intense stress, but it…" Jill just sighed

and turned away. "…never mind."

"Don't worry." Wiper said, as he moved away from the wall. "If it triggers, you could do with me what you did to Boomer." he added, before he glanced out a window, when he noticed something. "...looks like we've got company." he said, as he pointed at a silhouette in the distance.

Seeing it, Jill then turned to Tails. "Keep everyone inside," she said.

Tails nodded. "You should be careful, now," he said.

"We will," Wiper responded, before he headed outside with Jill following, wondering if it was King or someone else, but she remained close to Wiper for safety.

Soon, the two would be able to see the stranger more closely, as he approached the base. As it turned out, it was a male tiger, which looked quite grizzled and serious, and if they looked at his left hand, they'd see that he seemed to carry parts of a broken machine of sorts.

Seeing this, Wiper hissed. "That's him, alright..." he muttered.

Jill looked the stranger over as he came their way, still curious what he would be like, while awaiting him silently.

Soon, the tiger stopped a small distance from Wiper and Jill, silently looking at them. Then... "Brother!" With a hearty laugh, the tiger dropped the machine parts he held, before approaching Wiper, quickly and suddenly wrapping the snake in a bear-hug. "Has it really been five months? It felt like five years, my friend!"

Groaning, Wiper calmly patted the tiger's back. "You haven't changed at all, King." he hissed, before the tiger let go of him.

Laughing, King scratched his head, just as he noticed Jill. "Oh, and just who is *this* lovely lady?" he said, before he gently took hold of her hand, kissing it like a gentleman. "It's an honor to meet you." Then, letting go of it, he glanced at Wiper. "So, she your girlfriend?"

"No," Wiper said quickly, shooting King a glare.

Jill was surprised by his manner and by that question, as she cleared her throat to avoid commenting on it, and to keep herself from blushing. "My name is Jill," she said. "Wiper told me a little bit about you…"

"He did?" King said, as he chuckled. "Strange. Back in the day, he'd rather die than indulge anyone about how he felt about us others." Then, he wrapped his arm around Wiper, giving him a noogie. "But we were always best friends back then, weren't we, Dawn?"

"If you could call it that," Wiper grunted, before he managed to squeeze out of King's grip. "How did you manage to locate me, anyway?"

"Well, before Sage and Hunter decided to take some time away from us, I..." As he spoke, King scratched his cheek with a chuckle. "Well, I placed transmitters on them, so I'd always know where they are, and what they talk about. And luck would have it, Sage happened to visit you."

"So, you know what they talk about?" Jill said curiously.

"I do," King said with a nod, before he held his chin in thought. "...at least when I'm at the base. As soon as I heard Wiper, I pin-pointed his location, and hurried over here as fast as I could."

Wiper rolled his eyes, before he folded his arms. "So, what do you want, King?"

"What, apart from visiting an old friend?" King laughed, as he patted Wiper's shoulder. "Then again, if you're interested-"

"My answer's the same as it was five months ago, so no." Wiper quickly said, though King only chuckled at this.

"Well, I figured as much." he said, before he looked at Jill. "Actually, I thought about us maybe, I don't know, making some form of compromise?"

"…compromise?" Jill questioned, looking at Wiper in more wondering.

"Indeed." King began, as he folded his arms behind his back. "I don't suppose that you know what my ambition is?"

"You're still intent on bringing down GUN?" Wiper hissed. "Doing that won't-"

"I have no intention of bringing it *down* , Dawn, that wouldn't be fitting." King hastily retorted, before he looked up at the sky. "However, I feel that soldiers are being mistreated by the government these days. The higher-ups always expect their men to score them a victory, and they get punished if they failed to fulfill their expectations." Then, he scoffed. "They even use children. Hard to believe, but it's the truth."

"…why?" Jill asked with slight distress. "Do you even know why they do that?" With what Wiper told her about their past, and with her own past in mind, that sounded tragic to her.

"Beats me. I'm fairly sure that just about half of GUN never learned about the existence of that sort of project." King shrugged, before he closed his eyes. "But I had a vision. A vision of a nation where soldiers, no matter who they were or what background they had, could rally together in a bond of camaraderie, never having to worry about 'betraying their country', and always have something worthy to fight for. That military nation is my ambition."

"But someone told on you." Wiper said. "I still don't know who could have done it."

"In any case," King continued, as he glanced at Jill, "I've been hearing a lot of things regarding Metal Sonic, and I fear that he will be a major obstacle when it comes to founding the nation. Since you all seem to work against him, I figured that maybe a temporary alliance would be seen as fit?"

Jill closed her eyes. "…frankly King, I'm not worried about Metal Sonic," she said. "He's actually going to be the least of our worries at some point."

"Oh? Would this have anything to do with that Callous girl?" King mused, which made Wiper glance at him.

"How on earth did you know about her?" the snake asked in disbelief.

"Didn't Sage, Hunter and your other friends happen to meet her? Remember, transmitters, Dawn."

"Partly, yes," Jill replied. "So, you probably know some of the story, don't you?"

"I think so..." King mused, as he scratched his head. "...but would you care to run it by me again, just so we're clear on it?"

Jill glanced at Wiper, before she started, "Callous is pretty much my evil doppelganger, created by a very powerful vampire, who I sealed away. But according to the circumstances, that seal might be released…and I am the only one that can fight this evil force, called Corruption."

"Corruption? Sounds like nasty business." King mused, before he cracked his neck. "But how does that factor into the fact that Metal Sonic's going to be the least to worry about?"

"Corruption is more powerful than you realize," Jill said. "It is a manipulative power that can take anyone victim…and I mean *anyone* ." Saying that, Jill glanced at Wiper's cut across his abdomen, and her brows arched again.

Seeing the cut, King reeled back a bit. "That looks terrible! Dawn, haven't you considered getting a band aid for that?"

"To be honest, I doubt that it'd help." Wiper shrugged. "It's supposed to trigger under intense stress, but for all I know, I could suddenly burst into a ball of darkness right about now."

"Don't say things like that, Wiper, or they're bound to happen!" King said chastisingly, as he waggled his finger in Wiper's face, before he looked at Jill. "Regardless, as it stands, Metal Sonic and Corruption are two things that might become hindrances to all of us. As I suggested, a temporary alliance may be in our best interests."

"King, as admiring as your vision is, it's not likely to happen the way to want it to," Jill said. "I've seen things…and even something done

with good intentions can turn out bad." Then Jill looked back at King. "…I don't know how I feel about it," she said. "Wiper, what's your opinion on it? He's your comrade."

"I've already said that I lack interest, regarding his nation." Wiper shrugged.

"Well, you don't *have* to support my nation, hence why I said 'temporary alliance'." King said, as he folded his arms properly. "All that needs to be done is to take out Metal Sonic and that Corruption-force, and then we never need to see each other again. I am offering my assistance to you, and... well, what else are you going to throw at the machine? Children?"

Jill flinched when he said that, having Jack, Striker, Ani, Milo and Rudy come to mind; although, something else came to mind to respond to that statement. "King, maybe you know and maybe you don't, but long ago, children would beat a mad scientist with an IQ of 300, AND Metal Sonic…Professor Miles Prower was but a boy at this time." Jill turned away. "I don't really know what I'm saying, other then that you'd be surprised what anyone is capable of." Then Jill looked back at King. "Those children fought on their own free will, they weren't forced to. Heck, one of them really thought it was a big game..."

"But do these children know the gravity of what will happen if they lose?" King immediately retorted, and now, it became apparent that he was growing awfully serious. "Don't bring events from the past up in affairs from the present; whatever happened back then is long since done."

"So why do you seem to have issues with GUN for what they did to you, King?" Jill asked him. "I aim to keep my past from harming the present and future. Shadow the Hedgehog did the same thing, and I follow his legacy."

King growled; he honestly had no comeback to that. "...hmph. Suit yourself." he scoffed, before he turned around. "Pardon me for disturbing you."

"You're leaving, just like that?" Wiper uttered, as he raised an

eyebrow. "That's not like you, Twilight."

"...I still haven't thought of a name, though." King mused, as he scratched his chin. "What name would a nation like that need...?"

Jill shook her head as she turned to Wiper, "maybe he'll just learn the hard way."

"Oh, yes, almost forgot!" King said, as he snapped his fingers. "On my way here, I stumbled upon a squad of those Shadow Androids I've heard tales about. I took out a few, but I think they're gathering reinforcements." As he spoke, he picked up the machine parts he had been holding, before flinging them at Wiper's feet. As it turned out, some of the parts were colored black, as if they had come off one of those androids.

Seeing this, Wiper's eyes widened. "...how many?"

"Oh, I don't know... probably five, maybe ten? Who knows."

"On your way…" Jill peered at King solemnly. "…are they on their way here, or something?"

"I would imagine so." King shrugged. "And from the looks of it, you could use a hand. But what do I know, right? Me, who can't get over what GUN did to me in the past." Scoffing, he began walking off, albeit slowly.

Jill rolled her eyes. "King, right now, we don't need a smart ass. We have probably five or six of them on the team already." Then she looked at King. "Your point, however, was expressed clearly. Since our friends are on their way back, we'll have plenty of help to fight the androids, but until then…"

"Until then..." King repeated, as he slammed his knuckles together, as he looked at the horizon. "...we can have a really great brawl. And not a moment too soon; look."

As it turned out, several dots on the horizon were now spotted, headed towards the three at a great speed. "That must be the androids." Wiper hissed, as King cracked his neck.

"I can take care of most of them. You two stand back as support." King said snidely.

"Sure, whatever you say," Jill murmured. But in truth, that was relieving to know. She looked at both her hands, which were burned; one still more severely than the other, but hopefully, that shouldn't render her useless. At least the burns didn't hurt anymore, which allowed Jill to summon her bow once again as it came to her in a flicker of light.

Then she looked at Wiper. "Be careful," she said.

"Same to you," Wiper noted, as he got in a fighting stance.

As the androids got closer, King closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and began to hum. Then, his fists began convulsing, before Jill would notice something awfully strange; sparks of electricity emitting from his hands.

Jill blinked. "Wiper, all your friends have their own abilities right? What are his?"

"King's? Well..."

The androids were getting closer and closer, and seeing this, King grinned, just as electricity was dancing around both his arms. Then, he clasped his hands together, and raised them over his head.

"...his body carries ten million volts of electricity."

At that moment, King brutally slammed his hands into the ground, sending a mighty wave of electricity right at the incoming Shadow Androids, and though some of them evaded it, others didn't, resulting in them instantly exploding upon contact.

"…how convenient," Jill uttered with wide eyes, while watching that.

As the remaining androids rushed at King, he merely grinned, before clenching his fists. "YAAH!!" Suddenly, he threw his fist forward, smashing it right into one android that happened to get in range of him, tearing it to pieces as his fist tore through the android. "This is it! This feeling... how nostalgic!" he laughed, before he raised his

hand, sending a stream of electricity at two of the androids, keeping them in place until their circuits and bodies were completely fried.

As he did this, however, a pair of androids rushed at both Wiper and Jill, ready to kill. "Tsch... you ready?" Wiper asked, as he cracked his neck.

"Yep," Jill responded, pulling the bow string back. Once she let go, a thick arrow of energy was aimed for one of the androids, poised to strike its head, and strike the android it did; with such amount of force that its head snapped back immediately from the impact, stopping it in its tracks.

Just then, the other android attempted to kick Wiper, but with one motion, Wiper pushed the incoming leg away, avoiding the blow, and letting the android fly past him, before he jabbed his hand into the side of the android's throat, with pinpoint precision.

As more of the androids suffered the power of King, a few more flew towards Jill and Wiper, beginning to hurl Chaos projectiles at them.

Jill set up a barrier to deflect the projectiles, protecting her and Wiper both, and once the firing calmed, she put down the barrier long enough to shoot more arrows at the androids.

One android wasn't quick enough to avoid the incoming arrow, as it shot into its gut, propelling it backwards, as the surviving androids shot themselves at the two.

As one android attempted to attack Wiper, he easily ducked under a punch, before he began jabbing his hands repeatedly into the android's gut, tearing holes in its body. Another android attempted to perform a clothesline punch at Jill, in an attempt to knock her over, and it did, disorienting Jill for a minute in the process as she toppled over.

Before the android could take the opportunity to beat her while she was down, however, a massive electrical blast propelled another android right into it, sending both of them hurling away. "Haha! This is a true battle!" King laughed, as he kept blasting any android that got close to him with electricity.

Shoving the defeated android aside, Wiper went towards Jill, quickly helping her to her feet. "You alright?"

Jill snapped out of it by shaking her head. "Yeah, I'm okay," she said, feeling a bit ashamed at that blow. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Wiper said, just as he noticed an android rushing at them. "Excuse me." he said, just as he jabbed his hand at the android, striking it squarely between the eyes.

However, with a last burst of power, the android managed to shoot its fist forward, striking Wiper right in the gut. To top it off, its hand was suddenly wrapped in a dark aura, and a painful feeling Wiper knew all too well suddenly welled up in his entire body.

"Get away from him!" Jill yelled, holding out her hand. The minute she did that, a burst of Purity energy was released bent to destroy the android on contact.

That it did, as the android was blown to pieces the moment the energy struck it, though the damage was done. Backing away from the smoldering remains of the android, Wiper clutched his gut, breathing heavily. "Damn... another hit." he groaned, as he sank to his knees.

Jill knelt down beside him, putting up a barrier so the androids couldn't attack them when they were off guard. "How bad is it?" Jill asked. "Let me see it..."

"A-alright..." Wiper uttered, as he moved his hand away from the wound, and, needless to say, it looked much worse than before, with a small amount of black smog emitting from it. "It... it hurts... just like back then..."

"Okay," Jill murmured, as she coated her hands with layers and layers of Purity energy. "I should get rid of some of that before it starts affecting the Corruption in your body." Then she pressed her hand on his wound, while a sizzling sound would be heard.

"Kkh..." Wiper winced, as this process was painful, unlike anything he had felt in his whole life. Despite that, he gritted his teeth, waiting

for Jill to finish it.

"...there," She said, finally pulling her hand away from the wound. "That ought to be better." And it was. The wound looked no different then it had been before that android hit him. "Are you okay now?"

"...I'll manage." Wiper said with a nod, before he weakly got to his feet. "Thanks... I owe you one."

As this had gone on, King had been busy demolishing what remained of the squadron of androids. All while he did that, he had been laughing. "Fight, fight, fight! Can't you sorry sacks of scrap do any better?!" he roared, as the laughter grew more powerful. "Come on! Is there no one who can truly challenge the power of a King?!"

Once Jill put down the barrier down, she looked at King. "What a sorry sight," she said, shaking her head. "King, if all you want to do is fight and destroy, how can you expect to start a nation?"

Hearing that, King's laughter subsided, as he finally seemed to calm down. "...it happens." he muttered, as he rubbed his temples. "The battle high always gets the better of me. It's been like that since childhood."

"Basically, when he's fighting, he won't stop until the fight is over... usually." Wiper chimed in, as he looked at King. "I suppose our powers didn't come for free... all of us had some form of personality disorder, which could be seen as a dysfunction."

"True... Miser and Ripper are sad examples of that." King grunted, before he looked around. "I assume that the opposition is vanquished?"

Jill shook her head. "I thank you for your help, King," she said, "but I'm still not supporting your idea..."

"No matter." King shrugged. "As I said, whether you believed in my vision or not is your business, not mine. But if you ever feel that you need assistance against whatever you're fighting..." Then, he began walking off, waving to the two. "...don't hesitate to seek us out."

"...Twilight." Wiper said, which made the tiger stop in his tracks.

"...see you around."

"...same to you, Dawn." King replied, before he continued on his path.

Jill watched as King walked away. "Sure was convenient that King got here when all those Shadow Androids decided to raid," she said, turning to Wiper with a raised eye brow.

"It could be coincidence." Wiper shrugged. "I know King. He may seem like a loose cannon at times, but he'd never allow himself to work for anyone. He's got far too much pride for that."

"Well...if you say so," Jill said. "Let's get back inside. If everyone's on their way back, we should wait for them."

"...likely so." Wiper nodded, as he glanced after King, who was now a mere dot on the horizon. "...let's go."

Chapter 19

CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Jill and Wiper headed back inside, up in King's path, he'd see some figures walking toward him. Then sooner or later, one of them stopped when they saw him.

"King!" growled a familiar voice, which the tiger would recognize as Hunter.

Hearing that voice, King glanced ahead, to see all the former GUN squad leaders (sans Queen), along with Brick's group, heading towards him. "...friends!" he laughed, as he approached the group. "Hunter, Sage! It's been too long, hasn't it?"

"Three weeks, four days, nineteen-and-a-half hours, to be precise." Sage chimed in with a chuckle. "Give or take 27 seconds."

"Kekekekeke! To the point, as always!" Ripper cackled.

"King, in the flesh..." Newt uttered with awe, as he looked at King. "Can you believe that, Natal?"

"No..." Natal said, as she shook her head. "...I can't."

"Whoa, so that's King?" asked Rudy with amazement.

Hunter walked right up to King, as he carried the weakened Brick on his back with ease. "You met with Wiper already, haven't you?" he asked.

"I did." King nodded, as he glanced behind him. "According to Jill, he's got that Corruption-thing in his body, but he seems fine, despite that."

"I am a bit curious about this Corruption everyone is talking about..." Miser said, before she looked at Hunter. "You seem to know about it... so would you care to explain it to us, Midnight?"

Hunter was momentarily silent, until he walked past King, carrying Brick. "I'll tell you later," he said. "Either that, or this 'Jill' might be free to answer your questions. Regardless, we need to get them back home."

"I wonder what's for dinner," muttered Striker as he rubbed his growling stomach.

"Yeah, it's getting pretty late," added Milo, as he glanced up at the orange and now darkening sky.

"Hmph... you kids have fun, now." King muttered, as he walked past the group, waving to them. "I've got things to attend to. Ripper, Miser, we're off."

"What?" Miser blinked, as she looked at King. "Aren't we-"

"It's still a bit early, I think." King quickly replied, and that was enough for Miser and Ripper to follow King, leaving the others on their own.

Sage gave out a sigh when the three were out of sight. "He's still got problems with getting his priorities straight..." Then, she looked at Hunter. "You know, you can bring them back on your own; I'll head to the usual hiding spot. Be seeing you!" she said, before she flew off.

"Man... can't believe we were right together with legends like that, y'know..." Newt muttered, before he looked at Hunter.

"Well, it's been a long day, and we did get one Chaos Emerald." Jack mused, as he watched Sage fly off. "Wonder how Jill and the others are..."

Hunter simply continued on with everyone following him up to the point where they came to the front door. Striker and Rudy were the first to barge in through the door.

"We're home!!!" they both shouted.

"Finally!" said Ani, hearing them. "So, did you guys get a Chaos Emerald?!"

"We sure did!" exclaimed Striker, as he pulled the cyan colored jewel out of his pack. "Look!"

Ani admired it's clear and sparkling beauty with a small, "Oooh…"

"And it was so awesome!" Jack added, as he ran after Rudy and Striker. "We met all these cool guys, and there was lots and lots of fighting! You should have been there, Ani!"

"I see you finally got back." As the others eventually made their way in, Wiper walked into the room, observing the group. "Everything went smoothly?"

Hunter walked forward to Wiper, with Brick still on his back. "…it's good to see you again," he said, regarding a nod to Wiper.

"...likewise, Hunter." Wiper gave Hunter a nod, just as he noticed Brick hung over Hunter's back. "What happened to him?"

"He got hisself a beatin', but he`ll be alright after a quick check-up, I`d reckon." Whisker chimed in, as he looked at Hunter and Wiper.

Just then, Jill popped into the room once she had heard their voices, and the first one her eyes fell on were Brick, which widened in shock. "Brick?!" she uttered, coming over and helping Brick off of Hunter's back.

"I think he'll be alright," said Hunter. "If he lived through Sage's mind probing, then he's tough enough."

Jill gave Hunter a nod of understanding. *So she dug into Brick's mind as well,* she thought. *That must be how she knew about my memories.* With that, she dragged the bull off toward a room where she would tend to him, just as Charmy and Boomer passed by her with glances.

"Wow, he's sure out of it," Boomer remarked.

" ***He will recover.*** " Omega said bluntly, as he stood in the doorway, before he glanced towards Charmy. " ***...it's been a while, hasn't it?*** "

Seeing the machine, Wiper blinked. "...E-123 Omega?" he uttered.

"Believe me, we were just as surprised, Wiper!" Newt said enthusiastically.

Charmy looked over Omega with some surprise. "Yeah, it really has been a long time," he said. Then he chuckled, "and it's good to see you're still functioning as well as I last saw you!"

Boomer did a double-take at Omega. "Y-y-you're—!!!"

"That's right Boomer," said Charmy, grinning at her.

Boomer clasped her forehead in disbelief. "To think…" she muttered with wide eyes.

"Yeah, he and Captain Whisker almost got into this epic robot battle!" said Rudy.

"Yeah, that's right!" agreed Ani. "And I think I left my popcorn behind…"

"That's alright; we'll just make some ourselves!" Jack laughed, before he ran past the group. "Race you to the kitchen!"

Natal watched as Jack ran off, before smiling. "...wait up." she said, before running after Jack.

"...hm. That's unusual..." Wiper mused, before he glanced at Hunter. "Will you be staying here, by any chance?"

Hunter watched as the other kids ran off after Jack, especially Ani. "…I suppose I'll stay."

Wiper nodded. "All right. I suppose we should prepare a guest room, if that's the case."

"I can help out with that, y'know!" Newt said, as he butted his fists against each other. "Gotta do something other than just sittin' around, y'know!"

"What about that raven-matey o' yours?" Whisker asked, as he

folded his arms. "Think she`ll be fine on her own?"

"I trust Sage by herself," Hunter said. "If there's danger, she'll sense it long before it'll get to her."

"I suppose so..." Wiper nodded. "...though, I do wonder what King and his gang are gonna go through now, since they've likely been spotted by Metal's troops..."

"Come on Newt," Boomer said, motioning for the salamander to follow her.

"Uh, yeah! Hang up, Boomer!" Newt said, as he followed the duck.

"So, you're telling me that, despite encountering them twice, you still didn't get any Chaos Emeralds *from them, and you let them go without one casualty?"* Back in Westopolis, Metal was currently speaking with Callous, his arms folded. *"...pardon me, but I am beginning to grow disappointed in you, dear Callous."*

"I figure I would give them a fighting chance," Callous said with a shrug, acting as if it wasn't a very big deal at all. She really had no worries about anything.

"Noble." Metal scoffed, as he closed his eyes. *"But that show of nobility could lead to another defeat. There is a reason why my creator never managed to defeat Sonic and his motley crew, all those years ago... because he never killed them when he had the chance."* Opening them again, he looked at Callous. *"Calculate was in some shape when you brought him back. Since I'm still busy trying to calibrate how the androids work with the Corruption, you and Queen will have to get him up as quickly as possible."*

'Yeah, yeah, whatever..." Callous muttered, walking away.

Somehow though, as she started walking away, Metal would suddenly hear something...

"Metal..." there were whispers calling his name.

Metal blinked, as he looked around. "...who's there?" he uttered, as he clenched his fists. "And how do you know my name?"

But the whispers didn't exactly answer his question. "Metal..." it whispered, feeling as if there was a breeze that passed through the room, "You must come outside..."

"...why?" With a groan, Metal rubbed his temples. *"For crying out loud... why am I doing this?* " he muttered, before he followed the voice's advice, exiting the building. Once outside, he began looking around again. *"Alright, what is it that you want?"*

"You're really consulting the help of that woman?" Standing on the top of a building was a tall, cloaked character, which sounded like a woman, but she was hidden underneath her hood.

"...are you talking about Callous, perchance?" Metal uttered, as he looked up at the hooded woman. *"For your information, I am not consulting her, but she is assisting me. Just why would you care if I have her as a helper?"*

"You're allowing her help, even if you are aware of the fact that she can simply walk away when she's stabbed you in the back..." The hooded woman shook her head. "I'm afraid that was another mistake of unfortunate Ivo..."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about being backstabbed." Metal shrugged. *"I have only one small group left to crush before I become the undisputed ruler of Mobius, so naturally, there would be people who'd try to usurp my power. But unlike my creator, I am always prepared for something like that happening. Now... what's your business here, and who are you?"*

"My business concerns that black emerald Metal," said the hooded woman. "You're not aware of it, but simply using its power is breaking down the barriers that hold the horrors within that you've only heard about..."

"...really, now." Metal noted dryly, before he folded his arms. *"Listen, I'm all for being secretive for the sake of upholding drama, but I don't*

think we'll be able to see eye-to-eye unless you outright tell me what's gonna happen if I continue to use that black emerald... plus, I still want to know who you are." As he said this, a silvery tendril had shot from his arm, aimed not to harm the woman, but to pull her hood off.

Once Metal pulled off the hood, a pair of blind green eyes looked upon him. He saw her face, which looked quite similar to a certain someone else, only this woman was older, and yet...still young. Her long curly pale brown wool-like hair fell out from the hood.

"...you've got to be kidding me." Metal uttered, as he retracted the tendril. *"This has got to be some sort of hallucination; I keep seeing that girl everywhere I look..."* Then, he shook his head. *"No. No, this is real. So, who are you? Her mother?"*

The woman smiled. "Actually, yes," she said.

"Called it," Metal grunted with a snap of his fingers. *"So, as I said; if we're going to see eye-to-eye, we'll have to drop the 'secretive information' act and be honest. So tell me; what's going to happen if I overuse the black emerald's power?"*

"Simply, the vampire within is released from his prison, and you will have more trouble than you bargained for," she said.

"Hmph, figures." Metal shrugged. *"Pity. When I finally find some way to properly beat her, it's a trap that could cost me my regime before it gets off the ground."* Then, he chuckled. *"Ironic. I'm discussing strategy with the mother of the only one who can beat me. Don't tell me that you intend to discreetly relay this to your daughter?"*

"She has her own duties, and I have my own," she replied, as she turned around and started walking away. "…by the way, Sonic sends his greetings to you," she said, without looking back at him.

Metal blinked when he heard that. " *...how could you know that? He's been dead for at least fifty years! Unless...* " Then, something clicked in him. " *...just what are you? A specter?* "

The woman turned back and smiled at him again. "Well, Jillian had

to have gotten her abilities from *someone* ," she said. "Would you think she just received such power by chance?" Then somehow, in the blink of an eye, she was gone. No tremendous magical transportation occurred, but just a subtle disappearance.

Metal was silent, as he watched the woman vanish into thin air like that. *...now people are speaking from beyond the grave. If I weren't a machine, I'd swear that I was going insane,* he thought, before he rubbed his chin. *But she did give me some helpful advice... continuing to use the black emerald, despite the pros, could lead to my downfall. I should likely stop the channeling of Corruption into the androids; those with that stuff in them that haven't been destroyed should be enough.* Then, he turned to go inside again.

While entering inside, Cal passed by him while stretching out his back in agony. "How is it I'm an android and I feel that?" he groaned.

" *Because you are an android, Calculate,* " Metal replied, as he stopped in his tracks. " *Despite the mechanical enhancements to your body, you're still organic in a sense. Likely, the memory of pain still lingers in your subconscious. However, turning you into a full machine would only serve to decrease your battle capabilities.* "

After that, he turned to face the monkey. " *Anyway, we're going to have to find another way to defeat Jill and her friends. Using the black emerald is a far too large risk, you see.* "

Cal glanced at him. "Why the change of mind?" he questioned.

" *Well, I don't want to make any mistakes like my creator did, that's all.* " Metal said, as he shrugged. " *Who knows; that emerald could be containing the devil himself, for all we know. And let's just say that Eggman had a... penchant for getting the short end of the stick when it comes to such.* " Then, he turned around. " *We still have about ten androids we haven't sent out that have Corruption within them, so we should have some defense against Jillian. But until further notice, none of us can use the black emerald for any purpose. Understood?* "

"Clearly," Cal replied. "But if that's the case, then do we do anything about Callous, in case that doesn't sit well with her?"

" *Well, she seems to have taken a liking to you.* " Metal shrugged. " *If you can't have her see things our way... well, then we have no use for her. But no matter what you do, don't try to kill her; I wouldn't want to lose you.* "

"Gee, that's comforting to know," Cal groaned with a hint of sarcasm. As he started walking away, he went on with something else, "Remind me later that I have a score to settle with the bull…" He recalled Callous telling him things.

" *What, you didn't have a score to settle after Jillian?* " Metal chuckled, as he folded his arms. " *Oh, and see if you can't fetch Queen; she's been on the edge of Westopolis all day long, looking at that grave. She might catch a cold, or something.* "

Minding Metal, Cal went ahead and left the lab, venturing through the deserted city until he reached the outskirts that Metal mentioned. Sooner or later, he finally stumbled upon Queen. Sure as rain, there she sat; sitting in front of a mound of dirt, with the capsule Shadow's body had been stored in used as a tombstone. The capsule, however, was empty, so it could be assumed that his body was buried underground.

"...death is a cruel, but just mistress." Queen muttered, as Cal approached her.

"It is," Cal said in agreement. Then he grunted, thinking how surprising it was that they found something they could agree on. "We all wonder what we are sentenced on judgment day…I can only assume what mine is like." Cal was very conscious of all the things he did, wondering if there was a part of him inside that actually regretted all the things he did.

"The only certain factor in life is death, after all..." Queen muttered. "When people die, they die. There is no way of preventing that... but the hollow left from someone's death will never easily heal."

"There is one thing I'm curious about," Cal said. "Wouldn't it have been more proper if GUN had buried Shadow away in the Space Colony; his home?"

"What makes you think that they'd bother burying him, when they could make his body an attraction for the world to see?" As she spoke, Queen clenched her hands together. "Believe me when I say that GUN of today is nothing like it was during Shadow's early days; there are only a handful of actual soldiers with pure intentions in that organization. Everyone else have nothing but twisted and corrupted intentions..."

Unknown to either of them, the same woman that had conversed with Metal earlier was observing them from atop one of the buildings.

"So what is your opinion on Wiper in this case?" Cal asked curiously. "He didn't join your uprising; is he one of the ones with twisted and corrupted intentions?"

"...he is... a strange case." Queen grumbled, as she closed her eyes, massaging her temples. "Unlike King, Wiper lost sight of our ideals. He is a good soldier, but he allowed himself to be sullied by what GUN considers to be the legitimate ideals. True, I have some problems with him for that, but his worth as a soldier is..."

"…is?" Cal asked, raising his brow.

"...I can't explain it." Queen muttered. "I suppose I have some form of subconscious respect for my comrades, Wiper included."

The woman closed her eyes in thought. *Dusk, if only you realized how important you were to Dawn.*

"That can be understood, I suppose," Cal said. "My own comrades will hate me for what I did, and I won't blame them for it." Cal turned from Queen silently, actually wondering how they were doing since he left them. Boomer was probably going to ring his neck the next time they met, and Rudy might be confused, as well as angry. Charmy was a curious thought, as Cal wasn't really sure how he reacted to all of it.

If the chance ever really came, would they forgive me if I was sorry for what I did? Cal thought.

Opening her eyes, Queen eventually stood up. "...I've spent enough time mourning. I can't see anything I can gain from staying with Metal Sonic... I should leave, and rejoin my comrades."

"Really now?" Cal said. "Well, I'm sure that both Metal and I won't care if you wish to leave. I will notify him of your departure, then." Just as Cal turned, his eyes caught something. For a split second, he thought he saw a woman standing on the top of a building, but when he blinked and rubbed his eyes, he discovered that his eyes must have been playing tricks as there was nothing there.

Still, he continued to stare in wonder.

Noticing this, Queen raised an eyebrow. "...did you see something, Calculate?" she asked.

That woman…she looked like… Cal didn't say anything at first, and then he finally shook his head. "It's nothing," he said, as he walked on back down towards the city. Maybe it really was just his mind playing tricks; it wasn't worth making himself sound like a fool by telling about it.

It was in the middle of the night, and everyone was asleep as far as he knew.

Hunter gazed up at the moon. Good thing it wasn't full; otherwise his beastly instincts might've kicked in. Still, he didn't doubt the reason he looked at that luminous ball in the sky was just wolf instincts of the night.

I can't believe it, no matter how much I try to wrap my mind around it, he thought. *My daughter is alive…*

"You know, both Newt and Boomer are going to be disappointed, if you don't even use the guest room they set up for you." Hunter would hear a familiar voice behind him say.

"Don't worry, I'll sleep," Hunter assured. "But I'm still a night person you know."

"Yeah... you haven't changed much, Midnight." Soon, Wiper joined Hunter where he observed the moon, looking up at it. "So, I have to ask; just why did you and Sage split apart from King and the others? Both of you seemed down with his plot five months ago."

"Well, I have my own personal issues with the whole thing," Hunter growled. "…Dawn, do you realize that I was the one who told GUN about the uprising?"

Wiper's eyes widened, as he glanced at Hunter. "...you did it?" he uttered. "...does Sage know about it?"

"She reads minds, what do you think?" Hunter retorted.

"...good point." Wiper muttered, before he looked away. "...but why? Why go to such lengths?"

"King talks about his ideas with an unrealistic enthusiasm," he said. "He doesn't realize that everyone is much too different to be enjoined together at the snap of fingers…" Hunter then looked at Wiper with unusually honest eyes. "…it's all because King never learned was love was like. He was so bent on what was done to him that he doesn't realize what kind of a decision he's making. I, on the other hand…" he looked back up at the moon, until he closed his eyes. "…I got a single chance to understand was love was."

Wiper, too, closed his eyes. "...but you couldn't just have them arrest King?" he muttered, as he clenched his fists. "Instead, you were fired upon, and driven to exile... for god's sake, Dusk was willing to *die* to ensure your survival, Midnight."

"Dawn," Hunter said, "what they did was not in my control, and it was not my job to tell them what to do. I had too much respect to simply turn them in. Besides, that wouldn't do any good to lock them up, considering what I've been trying to teach them ever since…" Hunter paused, until he looked back at Wiper. "Do you remember back then, when I'd wander off at night often? I never really told you why, did I?"

"...no, you didn't, Midnight." Wiper muttered. "None of us questioned it, though."

"Maybe you should have though," Hunter remarked. "I knew information that would be important now…for instance, I'm aware of Corruption and its powers…" then he glanced at Wiper's scar. "… and that you have been attacked by someone who possesses it." Then he looked up at Wiper. "A lot of things happened to me while I went on my outings…"

Wiper blinked, as he glanced at Hunter from the corner of his eyes. "...such as?"

"I've been seeing someone, for one thing. I met her the first time I escaped…" he said, as his eyes were now growing strangely tender. "…needless to say, she didn't treat me the way at all the way everyone at GUN did. She had a bit of a rambunctious personality, I admit, but she had a soft side to her." Hunter couldn't look at Wiper, as he looked back at the moon. "I grew fonder of her the more I saw her," he said. "I felt so strange, but it felt like no matter what GUN did to me, it was all worth seeing her."

Then he closed his eyes. "…before I knew it, I had fallen in love with her."

"...really." Wiper uttered; he knew what love was, but found it strange that any of the seven could feel anything like that, especially after what they had gone through. "And... who was this woman?"

Hunter was silent, with eyes remaining closed as if pondering whether or not he should tell him, but since he had gone that far, he went ahead, opening his eyes to look at Wiper again. "Her name was Melody Symphony," he replied. "…this means that Anistasia is my daughter."

"...Ani's your..." Wiper muttered, as he glanced at Hunter. "...is that so. But... even with a daughter, you stayed with the unit?"

"I didn't even know she was alive, Dawn," Hunter said. "When I found out Melody was pregnant, strange things began to happen. Some other woman started to visit me, warning me that something was going to happen to Melody. This strange woman never told me her name, but she was the one that told me about this Corruption…"

He sighed. "She tried to warn me so many times, but I never listened…"

Wiper looked at Hunter; the story had piqued his interest. "...then what happened?" he asked.

"Something *did* happen."

At this point, Hunter got up from where he sat and turned away from Wiper. He didn't want him to see his hurt expression while telling the tale. "…One night I stumbled upon a horrible sight. A black substance was eating away at her while she was lying on the ground, unable to get up because she must have been about 8 months pregnant. When I tried to help her, that other woman appeared and snapped at me not to touch her, otherwise the black substance would get on me too. That woman told me to get her some help, and that she would watch her and make sure nothing would happen to Melody."

"But I wasn't able to get any help. GUN that night figured out where I was, and the minute I left Melody and that woman, a horde of GUN's soldiers and robots captured me and locked me back up at base."

Hunter started to growl lowly, but he kicked a nearby rock. "You remember that night, don't you? That night I did all that screaming, cursing at them and banging at the walls and doors to get them to let me out?"

"...yes..." Wiper muttered, as he closed his eyes. "So... she was killed, due to Corruption... my condolences, Midnight."

"Yeah, that's what I found out later," Hunter muttered. "But for awhile, I still thought she was alive and well, and that the strange woman had taken care of her." He finally looked back at Wiper. "I told GUN of the uprising, Dawn, because being involved in a rebellion would've endangered my new family. I thought they would've let me off the hook, but considering my earlier records, they fired on me. I gathered the members up and we took off, though I didn't realize Queen was left behind…my thoughts were still focused on Melody."

"So we eventually split off, and chose a time to rendezvous when things got a little safer, when I saw it."

He took a deep breath to say what he had to. "I saw Melody's grave. Finding out that she died, I felt lost. I never even knew what became of the child, so I secretly sought to hunt down that strange woman to get answers."

"Then lo and behold, I run into my daughter while she and her friends go searching for Chaos Emeralds," he finished.

"...so that's one reason why you left King's group..." Wiper muttered, before he closed his eyes. "...but where does Sage fit into it? Did she decide to just tag along for the hell of it?"

"My mind's an open book to her, so I figure she just did," Hunter said, shrugging. "I asked that whatever she read she kept secret, at first. We lived our entire lives being taught not to give into your emotions, and my story would've revealed weakness in me. I suppose Sage somehow understood…maybe."

"...I suppose." Wiper muttered, before he stood up as well. "...do you suppose that you'll stay here long?" he asked, as he folded his arms. "You've practically got all the time in the world, now, to get to know your daughter..."

"…I'd have to explain myself to King if I were to do that," Hunter replied. "I plan to stay for tonight and head out, and then maybe return, if it's that easy. King might want to challenge me again, who knows." Hunter let out a small chuckle. "He's always wanted to be the dominant one in the group…"

"Well, you know King." Wiper chuckled. "Remember when we were assigned to different units? He went on a tangent about how *he* should have been in charge of the Alpha unit, and not the Omega unit. But, aside from those tendencies, he only wishes the best for everyone... too bad that his methods aren't the best."

"Yeah," Hunter nodded, smirking. "Well, he *was* the oldest." As his smirk fell, Hunter glanced back at Wiper. "There's something though that puts me at a slight unease."

"Does it have to do with Corruption?" Wiper inquired, as he raised an eyebrow. "Or is it something else?"

"A little of both, actually," Hunter said. "If my daughter's alive, then did the Corruption consuming Melody at the time have any effect on Ani? It doesn't really appear so, but that Callous woman saw something in her that no one else notices. What that is, I don't know…but I want Ani to stay away from that woman."

"That, and your friend, Jillian…" Hunter looked confused, and at the same time, even a little surprised. "She seems to resemble the strange woman I met a long time ago…"

"What?!" Hearing that, Wiper backed a bit away from Hunter out of shock, before shaking his head. "...another one? First Callous, then that mysterious woman... Jillian seems to have more connections to these concepts of Purity and Corruption than I thought."

Hunter looked at Wiper seriously. "…what's this Purity?" he asked. "I've never heard of this, but you say this Jillian is connected to this?" Hunter was growing concerned about this now. *Does she have the answers I seek?* He thought.

Wiper tilted his head. "...so you only know about Corruption, and not Purity?" he uttered, before shaking his head. "...it's a long story, and the night is short. You can ask Jill for yourself tomorrow, if you so wish... but I think we could both use some sleep."

Hunter blinked, before wiping his eyes. "You're right," he said. "It's too late, even for my liking."

With a nod, Wiper turned around. "See you tomorrow, Midnight." he said with a short wave, before he headed back inside.

Hunter glanced back at the moon one last time while thinking … *what a strange way fate plays out.* Then he, too, headed back inside.

"So Queen is leaving," Cal said, happening by Metal again.

" *A shame, but that's how it is.* " Metal replied with a shrug, as he was busy operating a computer. " *Thankfully, we know that there's no way that she'd go to Jillian's group and spill the beans on our operations to them; with GUN agents there, she'd likely steer clear.* "

"Yeah," Cal agreed; especially after what he heard Queen say earlier. "I haven't talked to Callous yet, but if she decides to leave as well after what I've said to her, what are your thoughts on that?"

" *Really, as long as the black emerald stays in my possession, I could care less about what little Callous does.* " Metal muttered, as he continued typing. " *Frankly, I don't think she's responsible enough to handle something like that without ending up breaking it.* "

"That's what I figured," Call muttered, as he walked away. *…but somehow, I'm not sure she'll leave that emerald in our grasp,* added a thought in his mind.

Glancing back at Cal, Metal sighed. *Let's just hope that he's not thinking of following Callous, or anything...* he thought, before he turned back to the computer monitor, when he noticed something. " *...hm? An anomaly?* " Noting that anomaly, Metal began typing on the computer. " *Where on earth is the anomaly...* " he muttered, just as his eyes widened. " *...the android containment chamber. Something's wrong with one of the capsules...* " Growling, he stepped away from the computer, before heading away. *What could possibly be wrong? It better not be anything too serious...*

Eventually reaching the containment chamber for the androids, Metal glanced at the various capsules, containing the different Shadow Androids. However, one of them seemed to be... moving? *Strange... all of the androids should be shut of,.* he thought, as he approached the capsule. *Did Calculate forget to shut this unit off, or...?*

Eventually, Metal stopped by the capsule, placing his right hand against its door. *...why in Ivo's name would this...*

As he thought that, however, he heard a familiar voice come from inside the capsule. "Chaos Spear!" Thinking quickly, the Metallix quickly moved away from the capsule, just as its door was blown

open, crashing right into a wall. Then, a black blur passed right by Metal, headed out the exit.

" *Son of a-* " Metal grunted, as he pressed a finger against his ear, before starting to fly after the blur. " *Calculate, one of the androids escaped from the containment chamber. It's likely one of those with Corruption in its body. Intercept it and destroy it!* "

Seeing Cal walking up to her from where she leaned against the wall, Callous smirked. "Well, well," she muttered. "What's the word?"

"Well, Queen left," Cal said, just as a way to start it off.

"Really now?" Callous said, raising an eyebrow. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised, really. Queen didn't seem all that interested doing all the things Metal planned."

"You don't seem all that interested in Metal's plot either," Cal remarked.

"Now, now," Callous said with a tease. "No need for a sharp tongue…." At this point, she wrapped her arms around him which slightly unnerved Cal, peering right at him with interest. "Sure, I'm not all for his plans, but there are some perks to the job I like," she chuckled.

Cal tried to clear his throat, and ignored the fact he was turning red. "There's something I ought to tell you Callous."

"And what would that something be, Cal?" Callous questioned.

"Metal doesn't want to use that black emerald anymore."

The news almost slightly seemed to startle Callous, but she eased. "Is that so?" she asked, pulling her arms away to Cal's relief, and confusion. "Did he say why?"

"…well, he said that it might release that vampire from it if he continues to use it," Cal uttered. "Is that true Callous?"

" *Calculate, one of the androids escaped from the containment chamber. It's likely one of those with Corruption in its body. Intercept*

it and destroy it! "

Callous didn't even have a chance to answer that question when Metal buzzed in on Cal's communicator. Once Cal looked at her, she had a sharp look in her eyes. "Shit," she uttered, right away snatching Cal's wrist and pulling the monkey down the halls swiftly.

"WHOAH!" Cal blurted, since that took him by surprise.

As Metal chased the android down the halls, he attempted to blast it to pieces with a multitude of both beams and tendrils, but the android was just as agile as the original had been, easily evading those attacks. *Though, I wonder...* Metal thought, as he kept up his barrage, despite none of them connecting. *...why is he escaping? The programming shouldn't affect it like that!*

"Callous, hang on!" Cal said. "You think you'll find an escapee just by running after—!"

"Cal, do me a favor and shut your mouth," Callous surprisingly snarled. Then she halted right in the middle of a long hallway, which just caught Cal off guard so much he fell backwards onto his back.

Seems like it's coming in our direction, she thought, summoning up her whips.

Cal just stared in bewilderment at her.

And sure as rain, through a corridor the two were facing, both the android and Metal passed right through, though even with two people standing in its path, the android was not deterred, and kept its path clear. " *Don't just stand there, you two; destroy it!* " Metal called.

Callous knew the Corruption in the android, and she cracked her whips once to get its attention. *"#($*W#!"* she hissed, tapping into the Corruption in it.

However, the android didn't seem keen on fighting, as he simply kept rushing towards Callous and Cal.

" *Just destroy it!* " Metal yelled.

"I knew it wasn't going to listen," Callous grumbled. First, she pointed her palms forward at the android, as a burst of black energy impacted the android in order to stop it in its tracks. Then she hurled a whip to bind it.

"

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she snapped. To the android, it would translate, " *You will listen to me when I speak to you!"*

However, rather than be restrained by the whip, the android struggled quite fiercely. Then, he uttered something in that same language, which Callous would hear as " *Just what makes you think that the Ultimate Life form would take orders from a delinquent such as yourself?!* " Then, out of nowhere, he suddenly warped right out of his bindings, appearing behind Callous and Cal, before keeping up his escape attempt.

" *Would you two stop gawking and stop that escapee, already?!* " Metal yelled, as he fired a multitude of tendrils after the android, but the machine still avoided the blows quite masterfully.

"You little—!!!" Callous had it with this thing. She sunk within the ground, shot through the darkness below, and popped right back up in its path again, just in time to snatch the android by the neck. The grip was surprisingly strong.

" *You are NOT the Ultimate Life form!"* she growled in the strange tongue to it. *"How dare you consider yourself so high? You think you can speak to your Mistress like that?! The REAL Ultimate Life form is still amiss the river of spirits, wandering under our nose, and I will NOT have you mess up my plans!"*

With that, she snapped the neck. *Hopefully that should activate its self destruct sequence,* she thought.

However, in a turn that Callous likely couldn't have anticipated, the android simply grabbed hold of her arm, before slowly crushing it within his grip. " *No... I AM the Ultimate Life form and nothing you*

can utter will deter me from that path, bitch. " he uttered in that tongue again, before suddenly socking Callous with his free arm, coated in Chaos Energy, before he warped out of view.

" *Damnit!* " Metal cursed once the android vanished. " *Some anomaly that was... it even managed to override its self-destruct sequence. Did the Corruption have something to do with that?* "

Callous grit her teeth as she dealt with the pain of her arm. Luckily it wasn't broken, but the android had a pretty firm grip. "It seems that way," she finally uttered. Though it seemed strange; Callous didn't think that Corruption would give an android that much free will, but she disregarded it.

With a grumble, Metal closed his eyes. " *We'll have to locate it as quickly as possible; if it falls into the hands of someone like Jillian, who knows what could happen.* " he muttered, before turning away, grumbling something unintelligible, though something that could be made out was " *bloody Corruption* " and " *more trouble than it's worth...* "

Cal watched as Metal walked away, disturbed by what happened. "Callous," he said, turning. "Do you know what…" He stopped, finding out that Callous wasn't anywhere in sight. "Huh…must have gone after the android," he muttered.

As Metal continued walking, he folded his arms behind his back. *...if Corruption can somehow make an android do that... this is getting more dangerous than I thought it would. The black emerald project has to be discontinued.*

Cal shortly joined Metal. "Now I seem to understand why you didn't want to use that emerald anymore. Should we do something with it, while Callous hunts down that lone android?"

" *We can't destroy it.* " Metal muttered, as he glanced at Cal. " *And I don't feel safe hiding it anywhere other than close by me, when someone can locate it. We need some way to keep it from being used... some way to seal it. But for the love of me, I can't think of a way to do so... not yet, at least.* "

Chapter 20

CHAPTER TWENTY

The morning sun rose up on the horizon, casting light down at the Chaotix HQ. The rays of the sun eventually shone through the windows of the building, waking up the younger people sleeping there.

Ani overheard Charmy chuckling to himself, and curiously, she rose from her bed to the door where Charmy was simply sitting in a chair by himself. "What's so funny?" she asked, walking to him.

"What's so funny, you ask?" Charmy said in amusement, just as the other kids would join Ani. "Why, I think there's something going on."

"What do you mean, Captain Charmy?" asked Rudy.

"I mean, something between Boomer and Newt," said Charmy with a big grin. "First it's Jill and Brick, and that's all it takes to set off everyone else!"

"Something with Boomer and Newt?" Jack uttered, as he exited his own room, rubbing his eyes drowsily. "What makes you think that, Captain?" he asked.

"Well clearly they both are into the same thing," Charmy said, folding his arms as he continued to chuckle. "But this morning they were acting unusually clumsy around each other, and they don't really talk to each other much, but I know what's really going on." He laughed, shooting up to his feet. "And it's up to us to help them!"

"Wha?" Striker said, tilting his head. "Captain Charmy, you're not making any sense."

"Oh dear. Charmy, please tell me you haven't any crazy ideas in your head about messing with those two," said Cream, as she and Tails walked into the room, and to this, Charmy chuckled.

"Ideas? What ideas?" he said with a shrug. "I'm just looking out for one of my crew!"

"Like Vector used to do, back in the day?" Tails chuckled, as he folded his arms. "If there's something going on, then maybe it'd be best to let things go their own course for a while. There's no sense fixing what isn't broken, you know."

"Oh, I don't look at it as a 'broken' relationship," Charmy said. "I just like to give things a little push to get them started!"

Ani grinned, as if those words translated into something else in her mind. "Captian, does this mean…?"

"Yes Ani, I'll need your help on this one," the bee chuckled, as he walked off.

"WOO!" cheered Ani, throwing her arms in the air as she followed Charmy.

Milo and Striker both looked at each other, and then they turned to Cream and Tails. "Professor, what's he talking about?" Striker asked.

"Oh, I have my suspicions..." Tails muttered. "If I'm not mistaken, he intends to have Boomer and Newt get together, like Jill and Brick."

That seemed to get Jack to fully wake up, as he looked at Tails with disbelief. "You mean that..."

"As I said, I can only suspect," Tails shrugged. "Let's just hope that those two won't do anything too irrational..." he chuckled.

"I must admit, I'm curious about it," Cream said. "I'm sure it will go better then that time Vector tried to pair up Espio with a girl." Then Cream giggled.

"Yes, that was quite an episode, wasn't it?" Tails chuckled, though it didn't make the others any less curious.

"I see the majority is up and running." they'd head Wiper utter, as he stepped out of his own bedroom, yawning a bit, before glancing at

the group. "So, what's up?" he asked in a quite casual tone.

Cream wasn't usually the one to pass gossip around, so she politely walked away to her own business.

"There's something going on with Boomer and Newt, Captain Charmy says," Rudy said to Wiper. "And the Professor said that it was like what happened with Jill and Brick."

"Boomer and..." Wiper uttered, as he rubbed his chin. "...you know, I'm not that surprised, really. They both have an affinity for heavy weaponry, at least." he shrugged, before walking past the group. "I'll go on a little exercise round before breakfast, if you don't mind. Be back within the hour." he said.

"Okay, see you later Wiper!" waved Striker.

"Hey, speaking of Brick and Jill, I wonder if they're awake yet," Milo commented, scratching his chin.

"Chao!" Buddy soon came, and speaking of them indeed, Jill and Brick were following the little Chao to the group of kids.

"Morning guys," Brick greeted.

"Morning!" they all replied.

"Did you two sleep well?" Jack asked, as he held his hands against the back of his head.

"Mornin'." they'd head Natal say as well, as she walked out in the hall, rubbing her eyes drowsily... wearing a pink pajamas with cute, little teddy-bears on it.

Brick blinked when he saw that. *…That's just out of the ordinary,* he thought. Then Hunter entered into the room, which drew attention.

At first, the wolf was silent. Then he peered at Jill a moment, before he looked at everyone else. "Does anyone know where Ani went?" he asked.

"She's with Captain Charmy," said Rudy with a point at the direction

that the two of them had gone.

"She is, now?" Hunter muttered curiously.

"Why do you ask?" inquired Striker.

"Oh, nothing really, just curious," he said. Then he looked at Jill again. "Would it be alright if I could talk to you a moment…Jillian, was it?"

"Just Jill is alright," Jill said. "Yeah, sure."

Natal glanced at Hunter for a brief while, before she turned away. "I'll make breakfast." she said, before she headed towards the kitchen.

"Then breakfast's gonna be ready when Wiper gets back, and Jill and Hunter's done talking?" Jack muttered, before he stretched out. "Actually, I think I'm gonna go practice the harmonica a bit! Haven't done that in a while." he said, before he went back into his room.

"…so, everyone's going to pretty much go off and do their own thing, huh?" supposed Milo.

"I guess," Striker shrugged.

Hunter stopped a moment, glancing back. "Professor Prower," he said, "would you care to join Jill and I?"

Tails blinked, before he nodded. "I don't see any reason why not." he said with a smile.

Jill thought in wonder why Hunter would want to talk to her, and even asking Tails to join was a little questionable. She also recalled waking up in the middle of the night, and she saw both Wiper and Hunter out her window at a glance. She couldn't hear what they were talking about, but it was a good cause for her questioning.

The three of them wandered off away from the crowd to a place that was more private.

"So, Hunter..." Tails began, once they were out of earshot. "What is

it that you wanted to talk with us about?"

"There are some things I'm concerned with," he started, turning to them. "Because of that, I have questions that need some answers, and I was hoping you had them."

"Like what, for instance?" Jill asked.

"To start off, there is something you two should know…" he paused, because he was really pondering whether or not to say it. "…well, Anistasia is my daughter."

"What?!" blurted Jill in surprise, as that statement pretty much came out of the blue for her.

"She is?!" Tails uttered with equal surprise. "But... what would she have to do with what questions you have?"

"Well, allow me to tell you a story that will explain that," Hunter said, taking a deep breath before he would begin.

"I can't believe it," she muttered to herself. "A real Chaos Emerald." Boomer was staring in awe at the cyan emerald she had in her hand. Tails once told her the many gadgets he came up with that was powered by one of these, and now that one was in their grasp it opened up so many new possibilities for Chaos-generated weapons. Needless to say, Boomer was excited about that.

So in the comfort of her room, with all the shelves lined with her weapons and whatnot, she was looking at the emerald while thinking, *concocting* all kinds of different kinds of weapons she could make…

...at least, until she'd hear some knocking on the door. "Hey, Boomer, ya in there?" she'd hear Newt call.

Boomer didn't take her eyes off the emerald, but she responded. "Yeah, I'm here," she called. "Come on in if you want."

Soon enough, the door opened, and the salamander walked into the

room, though more cautiously than he usually walked into a room, as he looked around, whistling. "Wow, this is your room? And I thought my place back at the HQ was something special, y'know. This place is loaded!"

"Yeah, I guess," muttered Boomer. "Sorry about the mess; I spend most of my time in here and I forget to clean up." She was explaining the wrenches, drills, and other tools that were left on the workbench as well as some other things that were left on the ground here and there. Instead of expression any guilt of the condition of her room, Boomer was still more interested in the Chaos Emerald.

Since Newt neglected to close the door, two heads peeped in from the corner when the two of them weren't paying attention, shortly grinning afterward.

"Eh, don't worry 'bout it." Newt shrugged, as he made his way over to Boomer, making sure not to step on anything. "I usually keep it pretty messy around my place, too, so I'm used to that kinda stuff, y'know." he added, before he stopped, glancing at the emerald from behind Boomer. "...that gem's really somethin', y'know?"

"Yeah," Boomer said when she finally looked at Newt. "Can you believe it? People like Professor Prower, Captian Charmy and Shadow actually saw all seven of them at once! I can't fathom that!"

"It's not that much to fathom," muttered Charmy to himself in remark. Then his eyes turned to Ani. "Alright, get ready to commence faze one on my mark."

Ani nodded as her grin grew.

"Yeah, it's really hard to believe." Newt agreed with a nod. "I remember Shadow tellin' the new GUN recruits a story about how he used all seven to kick some alien's ass! It sounded far-fetched, but he told it in a way that made it seem absolutely real. And all that power, in a few gems... it's crazy, y'know."

Heh, the Black Arms, Charmy thought when he heard that. *Boy, do I remember that…*

"Captain Charmy told us that story too…" Boomer uttered. "…He didn't tell us a lot, but whenever Professor Prower visited, boy, he had probably the most stories. Most of them were about Sonic the Hedgehog though…it sounded like him and the Professor were close friends by the way he talks about him." Boomer stood up from where she sat, setting the emerald down on the work bench. For a minute, she started to think about what Newt said. "…I can't believe Shadow's dead," she finally said.

"...neither can I." Newt said, as he folded his arms. "Y'know, some of the rookies used to make some wisecracks from time to time, about Shadow's age and all that, but he still seemed just as strong as he was back in the day... it's really weird, thinking about it now, y'know."

"Brick said that the kids were devastated about his death," Boomer said. "…I wish I had gotten the chance to know him more. I didn't really get to see him as much as they did."

Charmy couldn't help but frown on that.

"He wasn't too often at the HQ, either." Newt mused. "I s'pose he was either visiting the kids, or on some mission. Everyone back there was just... blown away at the mere thought, y'know? Many of them didn't believe it... until they got the body."

"Then the body was taken…" Boomer clenched her fist and pounded it on the workbench angrily. "…by those two." Boomer still thought about Callous having taken her down in one shot. She wasn't going to admit to herself that it happened, because frankly, she had felt humiliated by it.

"Yeah... Queen and Callous." Newt muttered. "I still dunno what they wanted with his body... but if they're with that Metal Sonic, it can't be anythin' good y'know."

Boomer grunted. "You can't trust robots…well, I guess Omega and Whisker are exceptions, but nonetheless, I never trusted a robot."

"Okay Ani," Charmy whispered. "Deploy the skates."

With a nod, Ani took Boomer's skates from the side of her room with

her telekinesis and scooted them closer to Boomer and Newt…

"…but there are some things I don't get," Boomer continued, as she took a few steps. "Like why Metal Sonic is—WHOAH!!!" Before she knew it, her foot had put weight on one of the skates, and she slipped right into Newt.

"WAH!" Who, after having Boomer crash into him, immediately fell on his back, with Boomer right on top of him. "Ow... h-hey, Boomer, are ya okay?" he asked.

"Uh, y-yeah, I'm okay," Boomer uttered with some slight embarrassment at the turn of the situation.

Seeing that, both Charmy and Ani tried to suppress their snickering while hiding behind the wall.

"…I'm so sorry," Boomer muttered sheepishly, while she got onto her feet and helped Newt back onto his.

"Eh... d-don't worry about it, y'know." Newt said in a more or less embarrassed tone, as he scratched the back of his head. "Accidents happen, y'know?"

"Yeah…" Boomer murmured, with nervous chuckling following. Then she glanced down at her skates. "That's weird," she said to herself. "Weren't the skates over there?" Knowing she didn't want another accident, she picked them up to set them aside.

"Alright, now for the shelves," Charmy whispered, and Ani concentrated hard to find the certain screws and nails that held the shelves in place. Selecting a few, she pulled them out with telekinesis, and all of a sudden, a good portion of the shelves broke and weapons fell to the ground with a loud commotion.

"What the—oh c'mon!" Boomer complained, just as she put the skates out of the way.

"Woah!" With the shelves just collapsing on a whim, Newt was surprised, but it didn't take long for him to start picking the weapons that fell down up. "Huh... talk about strange. Boomer, you won't mind if I help ya fix this up?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, it's fine," Boomer muttered in frustration as she knelt down beside Newt to contribute.

Charmy snickered behind the wall, while Ani raised a brow. "I don't get it," she said. "How does that one help?"

"Watch for a minute," Charmy whispered. "Something always happens after accidents like that."

"Careful with some of them," Boomer commented. "One or two of those might unexpectedly shoot if you're not paying attention."

"Yeah, sure." Newt nodded, as he made sure to act extra careful. "Say... I haven't seen some of these kinds of guns before, y'know. Did you build all these yourself?" he asked after a while.

"Yeah, I did," Boomer said. "I just have a lot of free time on my…" Boomer stopped, when she felt something touch her hand. Then when she looked, she discovered that it was Newt's hand. "… hands."

Newt happened to notice that as well, and even though he was surprised by that, he didn't move his hand away. "...lot of free time... huh?" he asked.

Seeing that, Ani snickered, "Ooooooooooooh."

Boomer didn't do anything at first, but she snapped out of it by retreating her hand quickly, turning slightly red. "Yeah…that is, when we don't have a case to solve," she replied, scratching her head.

Charmy smirked. *Seems to be working fine,* he thought.

Turning a bit red as well, Newt cleared his throat. "Um... what do some of these things do?" he asked, as he moved to pick up some of the other weapons.

"…I think one of them shoots bubble-gum bubbles," Boomer said, a bit quietly.

"Bubble-gum bubbles?" Newt mused, as he carefully inspected one of the weapons. "That sounds pretty nifty, y'know."

"Well, I had to give Rudy some weapons too…" Boomer uttered.

Charmy saw enough, as he started walking away, with Ani following. "Faze One, accomplished," he chuckled. "Let's give it a minute, and then we'll move on to Faze Two!"

Ani kept her laughter bottled up in her hands. "This is almost as good as when we tried to prank Brick!!!"

"Yes, almost," Charmy agreed.

Jill remained fairly silent after Hunter finished his story. She remembered Wiper's version of their past, but she wasn't sure if Tails had been told any of this. Though this explained plainly why Ani had been brought back by Sage, and the strange thing that Jill suddenly sensed about Ani, this made her all the more worried, bewildered, and curious all at the same time. "So…you think Corruption might have an unknown effect on Ani?" she said.

Hunter nodded. "I don't know what, but…I can't risk anything. I'm not willing to lose my daughter too,"

"But it is a disconcerting tale, about all those children..." Tails muttered, as he closed his eyes. "To think that GUN could do something like that... anyway, you said that you wanted to ask questions. What do you wish to ask?"

"Yes," Hunter said, turning to Jill again. "I wanted to ask you about this 'Purity,' since Wiper had mentioned it, and I wanted to know about something else. That strange woman I met…"

Jill's heart leaped when she heard that, and for some reason, she had no idea why, but the mention of the woman in the story he told stole her attention. Noticing this, Hunter decided he'd start with that. "That woman…she looks a little like you. It isn't the case with Callous, where you two seem to be twins but she resembles you almost as if she was…"

"…related to me?" Jill finished.

Blinking, Tails glanced at Jill as well; out of the many things he and Jill had talked about, it never involved any woman who resembled Jill.

"So you know her?" Hunter asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm not sure," Jill said. "Because…it sounded like you described my mother."

Hunter's eyes widened.

"But," Jill continued. "I'm not sure that can be, because my mother died giving birth to me."

"...this might be a far-off guess..." Tails began, as he rubbed his chin. "...but you don't suppose that it could be her..." He didn't finish the sentence, because even to him, something like that seemed too farfetched to be real.

"Your mother?" Hunter said. "Really?"

Jill considered Tails' words thoughtfully. She had been seeing all of Tails' friends when they were dead, and they seemed to interact with her as real as if they were still alive.

Could the same principle apply to my mother? Jill wondered.

Hunter studied her expression. "Judging by the look on your face, I'd say you're as perplexed as I am," he supposed. "So you don't know anything about her other than she died?"

Jill nodded, keeping her thoughts to herself.

Tails hummed, as he scratched his chin. "...well, is there anything else you're wondering about?"

"Yes," Hunter said. "Do you think you could explain to me this 'Purity'?"

"Purity, is something I don't know much about myself," Jill said, "but it's a force that tied to Chaos energy for some reason, and it's the opposing force of Corruption."

Hunter nodded. "I see. Anything else?"

"…I possess the ability to use it," Jill said.

As Jill answered Hunter's questions, Tails closed his eyes, as he didn't have much to contribute to the conversation.

Soon Jill got into better details, telling Hunter about the various abilities she held that had to do with Purity. Jill even went as far as explaining some of the elements of her own past such as Deity and Callous, and then she began with the story of what happened to her, Brick, Tails, and the kids since the strange events at the Clubhouse.

After such a lengthy explanation, Jill took a minute to breathe. It really was a lot to explain.

Hunter processed all the information that he had just been told. It really did answer a lot of his questions, even some of the ones that he wasn't going to ask her; such as the specifics on Shadow's death. But what Hunter was really trying to wrap his mind around was everything on Purity. "All along…" he uttered in a low growl. "… Purity could have saved her."

Jill blinked. "Hunter?" she said.

Hunter turned away, hiding the hurt expression. He thought about Melody again, and when realizing that there had been a way to save her, he wished that he had learned about it sooner. Jill's mother never told him about Purity, and it was HIGHLY unlikely that she wouldn't have known about it.

It just made Hunter angry.

"Thank you for answering my questions," he said. "I don't have any more."

Tails looked at Hunter with a raised eyebrow, before nodding.

Still on his stroll, Wiper was in his own thoughts; about Purity and Corruption, Jill's connection with those two elements, and the

reappearance of his former comrades. "...things have been hectic lately." he muttered.

Suddenly, something warped into view right in front of him, which threw the snake off, making him go into a defensive stance. "Who's that?" he asked, just as he noticed who this stranger was. "...oh no..."

As it turned out, it was a Shadow Android, though his head was hanging loosely from his neck, as if it had been snapped in two. "...you. Do you know of a place I can get this fixed?" he asked, pointing at his neck.

"..." Blinking, Wiper lowered his stance, looking at the android with a curious look. "...excuse me?"

"Hmph... never mind, then. I'll find something out by myself." the android scoffed, as he brushed past Wiper, headed towards the HQ.

"...damn!" Quickly spinning around, Wiper began running after the android, which already had broken into a skate, making him much harder to catch up with.

Up at HQ outside, Striker, Buddy and Milo were hanging around as Striker was practicing his batting. "You sure you don't want to play a game with me, Milo?" Striker asked the little lion cub that sat, watching him.

"No, I'm okay," Milo replied. "I've never really gotten the hang of baseball. Besides, somehow I always get hit in the head with the ball…"

"Chao?" Buddy found that surprising for some reason.

As the two were chatting, eventually, they'd see something come rushing towards them... something awfully familiar.

"Chao!" Buddy was the first to notice it, grabbing the boys and directing them at it.

"Hey, what's that?" Milo asked.

"I think that's Wiper!" Striker said. "But he's chasing somebody, and they're heading this way!"

"All of you, get inside, and lock the door!" Wiper called, just as they'd see what he was chasing; the Shadow Android, his head still hanging loosely.

"Uh-oh!" Striker said, as he was geared up and all ready set on doing just that, when he was grabbed and stopped. To this, Striker turned to a strangely calm Milo. "Huh?!"

"Everything's okay Striker," he said, his eyes glowing. "…I don't think that android is going to hurt us."

"Wha?" Striker was utterly confused; he rarely saw Milo this way. But it looked like they were staying right where they were.

"HEY! Hurry up and get inside!" Wiper called again, just as the android seemed like he could just burst right through the door...

...until he stopped, right in front of the kids. Then, grabbing his head and trying to straighten it out, he looked at them. "...do you know if someone can put my head back in place? I'm afraid that it might accidentally fall off any second now."

Striker was speechless.

Milo looked at the Shadow Android with his glowing eyes for a moment, and then, he smiled. "Boomer might be able to help," he said. "She's good with that kind of stuff, but I'm not sure if we'll get them to help you."

The android would have nodded, had it not been for his neck being all but ripped off. "Well, as long as I don't have to hold my head up, I don't mind how long it's going to take."

Finally, Wiper caught up with the android, but seeing him casually converse with the kids like that was enough to render him speechless as well. "...what the..."

"Well, we have to be careful going inside," Milo said. "Everyone's going to be jumpy…" The little lion turned and started walking to the

door of the HQ. As Milo approached the HQ door, so did the android, still holding his head in place.

What's up with him? Striker wondered.

...what's going on? Wiper thought, as he looked from the android to Milo. *Why is he acting like he knows the android?*

Striker turned to Wiper worriedly, "Wiper, should we try to stop them? Everyone's going to freak out if they see Milo bringing a Shadow Android into the building."

"...I don't know." Wiper said, as he threw his arms into the air. "For once, I'm speechless. I have absolutely no idea what's going on here."

With that, Striker cautiously followed the two of them inside.

Opening the door and allowing the android inside, Milo led him through some of the halls. The first one they ran into was Brick, and the very instant that he saw the android, he froze. "Milo, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!" he bellowed. Then he rushed at the android to punch it.

"Brick! Wait!" Milo called, but that didn't stop the bull.

And Brick's fist rammed right into the android's face, causing his head to fly right off his shoulders, landing and rolling on the floor. However, the body remained in place, folding his arms. "Not to be rude, but... you just knocked my head off. I expect an apology," the head uttered, as it gave Brick a look.

"Wha?!" Brick was completely surprised by the way its head was knocked off, but the fact that the android didn't attack was what got Brick.

"Brick, he just wanted his head fixed," Milo said, as he went over and picked up the android's head. "We were hoping that Boomer could help; either that, or the Professor."

Brick just stared at that head with a twitch. "I'm not even sure it's possible to convince Boomer…hell, I'm not convinced. Just what's

going on?!"

"Brick, why are you yelling?" The bull turned, seeing Jill, Hunter and Tails approaching.

Ignoring the incoming group, the android's body turned to Milo, before taking the head out of his hands. "I'll take care of this," he said, as he held the head over his right shoulder.

Brick didn't know how to explain his excuse, so he allowed the group to come and see for themselves. When they did, it was the expected response.

"Milo, what are you doing?!" Jill questioned strongly when she saw the Shadow Android. "Did you let it in?!"

"Jill, be nice to him," Milo said, as his eyes were still glowing; something that stole Jill's attention immediately.

"Look, I won't be any trouble." the android said, as he turned around to face Jill. "All I'm asking is for someone to put my head back on properly. If I'm unwanted here, I'll leave as soon as I don't have to carry my head around." Then, he caught glimpse of Tails, and the head blinked. "...Tails? What happened to you? You weren't that old the last time we met."

Hearing the android say that, Tails blinked. "What is he..."

That just made Hunter more confused, but somehow, Jill was starting to be convinced. She took another look at the android, and felt something strange about it. Then she blinked. She wasn't sure why, but she somehow understood Milo's intentions. "…I'm sorry about our behavior," she said, cautiously.

"Brownie?!" Brick remarked about what she said.

"We can help you," Jill continued, ignoring Brick. "But it might take a moment to convince everyone else that you're not here to hurt us…"

"...as long as you can help, I'll be grateful." the android said with a brief bow to Jill.

"Breakfast is ready!" they'd suddenly hear Natal call from the kitchen.

Jill regarded a nod to the bow, and then she looked to Milo. "Milo, I need you to let everyone know what's going on," she said. "When they see how calm you are, they might be more convinced then if someone else told them."

"Sure," Milo said, as he walked past her. But to himself, he looked back at the android. *He doesn't remember?* he thought.

With that, Jill led the android further into the HQ, with Tails, Brick, Striker and Wiper following. They made it all the way to Boomer's room, where the door opened and Boomer and Newt stepped out. Noticing the group, Boomer was shocked when she saw the android. "Hey! Wh-what's going on here?!" Boomer questioned in disbelief. *Why the hell did they bring an android in here?!* she thought, keeping more of the shock to herself than letting it be expressed.

"Hey, what's that about?!" Newt chimed in, as he glared at the android. "Come to wreck the place, have ya-"

"Newt, it's not hostile." Wiper said, as he glanced at the android. "He just... needs some help with his head."

"...whuh?" Newt uttered with a raised eyebrow.

Boomer looked the android over. "...you mean, it came to you?" she asked.

Jill nodded.

"...and it didn't attack or anything?"

Jill nodded again.

Boomer rubbed her chin. *Now that's unusual,* she thought. Not only that, but Boomer was edgy about it. What if she repaired it, and then it attacked them when they were the most vulnerable? But yet… something about the android just eased Boomer. "…I suppose I can help," she uttered. "The rest of you can go ahead and eat breakfast.

I'll work on this."

"I'll stay too," Jill said.

"Brownie, you sure?" Brick asked.

Jill nodded.

"Alright..." Newt muttered, though he did glance at the android with some unease. "...just be careful, ya hear?" he said to Boomer, before heading to the kitchen.

"I'll see if Natal can't save some for you two, if the operation takes long." Wiper said, as he gave the others a nod. "We should go; Natal can get edgy if you're too late to the table."

"Okay," Striker said, as they all followed Newt and Wiper, leaving Boomer, Jill and the android to enter into Boomer's room.

Chapter 21

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

All of her weapons had been picked up, but the shelves hadn't been fixed yet, and she was still irritated about that, as well as suspicious as to why accidents have been happening to her this morning. Anyhow, she heaved up a large tool box and fished through to find the proper tools to do the job.

Jill only glanced at the android for a moment. She remembered the first time she saw one, and how it was attempting to manipulate her to believe that it was the real Shadow somehow. This one hasn't seemed to try anything; in fact, it was pretty honest asking for the maintenance it needed. Jill just felt uneasy about it.

"So, how long do you suppose this will take?" the android asked, as he placed his head on a bench, before his body turned to face Boomer. "I don't want to hold you up for too long."

"It probably won't take me too long," Boomer said. "I usually have no problem with things like this…" She stopped for a minute, wondering why she suddenly talked so freely to the android, but she dropped it when she brought the tools over to the bench where his head was. "How did this even happen anyway?" she asked.

"...well, this happened." the android muttered, as he held his arm out. Slowly, a dark aura surrounded it, before it faded away. "I had a run-in with the woman who excels in the use of the energy known as Corruption, which was implanted into my body. She snapped my neck, but... I suppose the Corruption corroded the self-destruct mechanism, so I survived that." Then, the head smirked. "Then the bull punched my head off."

"You…" Jill was surprised to hear what the android said that she stumbled.

Boomer even accidentally dropped a tool to the ground as a reaction. "What did you say?!" she asked, growing angry at the

mention of who she thought he was talking about.

The head glanced at Boomer. "I said, the bull punched my head off." he said matter-of-factly, before blinking. "...oh, you meant the woman. I don't recall her name, but she was with Metal Sonic; an ally of his, I'd reckon." Then, he looked at Jill. "...yeah, no doubt about it; she looked just like you... but her attitude and fashion sense was deplorable, to say the least."

Like it described anyone else? Jill thought surly. "Her name is Callous," she said aloud.

Boomer picked up the tools again and picked up the head, handing it to the body's hands. "Would you hold that in place for me?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure." the android said, as he took hold of the head. "Callous... I don't know why, but she chose to speak to me with a foreign language. And somehow... I understood it, and replied to her in it as well. It's a curious thing..."

Another language? Now that's something I've never heard, Boomer thought, as she started with the repairing.

Jill recognized what the android was talking about. "I don't understand it myself," she said, "but when she speaks that language, it's a way for her to try and control something under the influence of Corruption…"

Boomer gave Jill a blink of surprise, before she returned to work.

"...hm. I suppose her control didn't work on me," the android mused, as he closed his eyes. "Though, what factor decided that she couldn't control me?"

"That's what I'm wondering," Jill remarked, looking at the android. "Maybe somehow you were strong enough to resist her control…but I don't have a clear answer as to why."

"...maybe a design flaw." he muttered. "I was based on the Ultimate Life form... maybe more than expected."

Jill looked at it longer. Obviously the android was conscious of the fact that it was an android, and not that it believed it was Shadow. That somehow eased Jill on the idea that it might be playing them. "…I wouldn't call it a flaw," she said. "Milo saw something that we didn't; maybe something that Metal Sonic or Callous didn't either, and because of that, he showed no fear towards you. Milo is usually…well, afraid of everything."

"Is he, now?" the android muttered, as he closed his eyes again. "...well, there is an exception to every rule, I suppose."

"An exception…" Jill said thoughtfully. It was then that she remembered Milo's abilities, and the fact that his eyes were glowing when he was around the android. She didn't understand it herself, but when Tails looked into it, he had concluded, basically, that Milo had a way to connect with energy; *spiritual* energy.

Having trouble thinking? Heh…

Jill lost track of her thoughts when she heard that voice in her head. *Yes, and that didn't help much, you know,* she uttered in her head.

The other voice in her head snickered. *Want me to give you a hint or two?*

Sonic?! You know what's going on?!

The android blinked, as he looked at Jill with a curious look. "...is something wrong?"

You know, Sonic, she could just ask me if she wanted to know what's going on, a different voice in her head said, though this one would be very, VERY familiar. *No sense in being cryptic about it.*

Jill was silent, wondering just what was going on. "…Just a little migraine I think," she answered.

Heh, look at that. She calls us a headache!

It does cause a lot of mental strain to talk to you guys, Jill admitted in her head. *Shadow? Is that you?*

Yep. Shadow said bluntly. *I'm sure you've got a good deal of questions... but when I think about it, this isn't really the best spot to talk about it. Maybe you should leave Boomer to fix the android.*

Jill closed her eyes and rubbed her temple, as she really was getting a headache, *Alright…*

"Good grief, you have a lot of junk in you," muttered Boomer. "I took out what'll cause you to self-destruct, so you don't have to worry about that." Boomer thought that was awfully generous of herself to do so. *Tsch, what a softie I'm turning out to be,* she thought. "I almost got your head back on, just a moment longer."

"Thank you." the android muttered, before he glanced at Jill. "...are you sure that you're alright?"

"I'll be fine," Jill said with a small sigh.

"Alright, you guys should cover your eyes a minute," Boomer said, as she brought a blowtorch toward the neck to wield. She didn't bother waiting whether or not they would, as she brought the mask down over her face and went on wielding. Five minutes later, she pulled the torch away, and it sizzled out as she brought the mask back up. "All done," she said.

Rubbing his neck, the android smiled a bit, as his head was finally back into place. "Nice... looks like I owe you one." he said with a nod to Boomer.

Alright, ask away, Jill. Shadow said in Jill's head.

Just generally, I'm wondering why this android isn't attacking us, and why Milo wasn't afraid of it, Jill thought. *It even asked if I was alright…*

Boomer started to put her tools away. "It was nothing," she said to the android. "I'm just glad you didn't rip us apart…"

"Now why would I do that?" the android asked with a genuinely surprised look on his face.

Well, you've got me to thank for that. Shadow replied. *After the last*

time we conversed, I began thinking... mainly about how this situation keeps escalating, almost to a point where not even you could keep it under control. But, as I'm already dead, my choices on how to help you were limited... but as a spirit, I could possess a body, but only if it was my own.

Wait, you mean…you possessed the android?! Jill supposed. *No, that doesn't make sense…your subconscious would pull through the program in the android…right?*

"…" Boomer was just dumbfounded by the android's reaction. "Never mind," she finally groaned, throwing her hand at him. "What do you plan to do anyway?" she then asked it.

"...I don't know." the android shrugged, as he folded his arms. "I suppose I should find some place to seek shelter; Metal Sonic's bound to be combing the entire world for me as we speak."

Okay, it's not actually a possession, per se. Shadow admitted. *I attempted it, but both Metal's and Eggman's programming of the android made it impossible for me to properly overtake the body. However, by messing with it, I did change some things around; at the cost of it no longer having any memory past the Black Arms Invasion, I was able to eliminate its loyalties to Metal, and subtly manipulate him to get here, so he could be of assistance to you, in my place.*

So that's why Milo acted the way he did… Jill thought in realization. *He knew it was really you somehow…* Also overhearing Boomer and the android's conversation, her head perked up. "You know," she said. "Why don't you stick with us? We're fighting against Metal, and if you don't want anything to do with him…"

Boomer shot a look at Jill. "Are you serious?" she asked.

"...would that be alright?" the android questioned, as he raised an eyebrow. "I mean, most of those I've met here seem a bit on edge with me around... and not to mention, with Corruption in my body, I'm likely a walking danger zone."

"I think everyone can warm up to you," Jill said, "and if that

Corruption get's out of hand, I can counteract it with my Purity energy. No matter what, it'll be my responsibility, and I'm fine with that."

Boomer stared at Jill, wondering just why Jill offered for it to stay, but she looked at the android to know what its answer would be.

"...well, I haven't got anywhere else to go." the android said, as he gave Jill a brief bow. "Thank you. I'll try not to cause any trouble."

Well, I'd say that you got a lucky break. Shadow said. *If he can use Corruption, maybe you could finally figure out some way to counteract Callous.*

Yeah, Jill thought, smiling at the thought of that.

Just then, the door opened and Milo walked in, carrying two dishes of food. "Here's breakfast for you guys," he said. "Everyone knows what's going on, but they're all pretty nervous."

Boomer took one of the plates. "Well, I guess I have to admit that I'm okay with it…sort of," she said. "No offense, but I'm still going to keep on my toes."

"None taken." the android said, as he closed his eyes. "I'm just glad to have an actual roof above my head."

"Thanks Milo," Jill said, taking the other plate.

"You know, it's probably about time I activate Whisker and explain the situation to him too," Boomer muttered as she munched. "I don't know where Omega is; he's probably outside somewhere…"

Jill then looked at the android. "…what should we refer to you as?" she asked him. She wondered if she should call him Shadow, or not, considering that this android was possessed by the real Shadow after all, but the fact that it was an android and it was aware of it might make it seem awkward…

The android blinked, as he scratched his head. "...my serial number, perhaps? It's SA-55."

At that point, Jill would hear a light chuckle from Shadow in her head. *Heh... sass...*

Jill tried not to laugh.

"A serial number doesn't exactly roll of the tongue, frankly," Boomer remarked, "but a given codename aught to sit well. After all, Omega has a serial number, but we have a name to call him by."

Jill started to think of a codename, hoping to come up with one at the top of her head. Without really realizing it, she started to think about the fact that Shadow had actually been able to take an android and bring it to them; just to help them in his place. It blew her mind. While thinking about that, a name came up instantly. "Proxy," She said, looking up at the android.

Boomer raised her brow at Jill. "Proxy?" Knowing the meaning of the word, Boomer wondered curiously why Jill picked that word.

Milo smiled. "I like that name," he said. "It sounds cool!"

Not a bad suggestion, muttered Sonic in Jill's mind. *It was way better than what I was thinking of, heheh…*

"...Proxy..." the android said, as he repeated that name to himself a few times. "...Proxy, Proxy..." Then, he smirked. "...that is a better name than SA-55. I think we can go with that." he said, nodding.

Jill smiled. "Good."

"Hunter, are you leaving so soon?" Charmy asked, catching the wolf on his way out.

"Yes," he said, looking back at the bee. "I have business to take of with my comrades, but I expect to return."

"What kind of business?" Ani asked.

Hunter looked down at Ani for a moment. "It's complicated," he said, "but I'll be sure to tell you when I get back, depending on whether or

not I might return." At that point, he looked at Tails. "You will notify Jillian I've left, right?"

Tails nodded. "You take care, Hunter."

Just as he said that, the sound of wings flapping just outside could be heard. "Good morning, Hunter!" they'd hear Sage call from outside. "Ready for a new day?"

Hunter looked out, and when he saw her, he nodded. "Sorry I kept you waiting Sage," he said.

As he took a couple steps outside, Ani called out to him, "Hurry back!"

Hunter almost hesitated when he heard that, but then he walked on.

Sage couldn't help but chuckle. "They're so charming when they're at that age..." she mused, before she turned to Hunter. "So, you found your answers."

As he walked, Hunter replied, "For the most part. If King will react the way I expect him to, then I might have a harder time." He said this figuring that Sage would know what he's talking about.

"So you're going back to his side?" Sage noted, before she chuckled. "If that's the case, then all we need is Wiper and Queen, and the whole group's back together... so, pop quiz; how long do you think he'll have a fit before he forgets about it and welcomes you like nothing ever happened?"

"I'm not going to King's side, Sage," Hunter said. "I'm going to let him know that I won't be part of his plan, and I then I hope to come back to Jillian and her friends."

"Oh..." Sage nodded, as she closed her eyes. "...are you sure about that? If you do, there's no telling if he won't send Ripper on a house-call to Jill and her friends..."

"I'm not worried," Hunter said. "They're more than capable of defending themselves, even if Ripper is a total maniac, but if King even attempts something of the sort, I'll rip his throat out."

"You'd get Miser on your case if you tried something like that." Sage said, before she sighed. "Poor girl... can't enjoy life, because she can't die... and yet, she's the one who just wants us to be friends... you can't help but feel sorry for her."

Hunter sighed too when he heard that. "Probably...but I admit that I sympathize with her on that. At least she'll be the easiest one to tell."

"I suppose that it's a good thing that Queen's with Metal Sonic; if she and King had been together, we'd be in more trouble than we bargained for." Then, she glanced down at Hunter. "Speaking of... you never got around to telling me about Corruption before I left for the hideout. Care to indulge me a bit?"

"Mind as well," Hunter shrugged.

The wind howled with a lonely moan through Westopolis that morning. Someone else treaded across these deserted streets. A toucan groaned, "Oi, what a depressing city I'm in." With his Rapier in one hand, and a wine bottle in the other, he continued forward without caring to think whether or not there would be anything threatening in the shadows.

As the toucan walked through the streets, he would eventually spot a female bear watching the town by herself, and from the looks of it, she was just about to leave.

Seeing the bear, the toucan raised a brow. *So it seems I'm not alone...* he thought. Approaching the bear, he took a swig of his wine bottle. "Senorita," he said, "may I ask why you stand in the middle of a forsaken city?"

The bear looked down at the toucan, before shrugging. "I was going to pay my respects one last time, before I left this place." she said, before she began walking past the toucan. "And you?"

"Just a wanderer, chica," the toucan replied, watching her walk away. "A wanderer that searches for drink and women...though I'm afraid you're not my type."

"Sorry to disappoint." the bear shrugged, before she glanced back at the toucan. "There's only one other woman in this city now, besides me. But you ought to be wary of her company... and to be frank, be wary of her in general." she added, before she broke into a jog, out of the city.

The toucan raised his eye brow again, seeing the bear running off. *Another woman?* he thought, and then he couldn't help but chuckle. "...perhaps that woman ran her out of this city. Ah, *Los celos de las mujeres."* After another drink of his wine, he turned and walked past Shadow's grave, paying no mind to it as he continued on.

As the toucan kept walking, he'd pass by a dark alleyway, where he'd hear a low humming noise; almost as if it was a machine.

Hearing it, he stopped and glanced into the alleyway. The grip on his Rapier grew firm, as he got a bad sense of things. "Who's there?" he asked calmly, taking another drink of his wine.

"...I could ask the same thing." a robotic voice said, as suddenly, the toucan would feel a powerful grip around his neck; an arm was actually extending out from the darkness of the alley. *"Who are you?"*

Choking, the toucan grabbed the arm, dropping his wine bottle in the process and allowing it to shatter on the ground. " *Me llamo* Flamenco!" he wheezed, "and you owe me another drink amigo!"

"...you have some nerve, Flamenco." the voice uttered, as the owner of the arm stepped out of the shadows, this being Metal Sonic. *"Ahora usted explicar, o te rompes como una ramita,"* he added, the grip tightening dangerously so.

Flamenco gagged farther. " *Pues, No quiero hacer daño!* Now, would you be so *bueno* as to let me go?"

"..." With a scoff, Metal threw Flamenco down to the ground, looking down at the toucan. *"Now, what do you want in my city?"* he said in a very harsh tone.

Flamenco rose to his feet with some irritation, as he dusted himself

off. "As I told the bear," he grumbled, "I'm just passing through."

"Oh, yes, Queen..." Metal muttered, as he briefly glanced towards the edge of town, before he suddenly pointed his arm at Flamenco, a blade protruding out of his palm. *"Well, amigo, you'd be better off just passing through the city immediately. This place is under my control, and only subordinates and associates of mine may freely enter."*

Flamenco just glared, ignoring the blade as he walked on. "Si, I'll be on my way then, Senor." he growled. Then as he walked farther, "...geez...and a buenos dias to you too..." he grumbled sarcastically as he walked away.

From the top of one of the buildings, Cal descended down next to Metal with his jet pack. "Great, a Spaniard," he groaned.

"That's not what irked me." Metal muttered, as he retracted the blade. *"What irked me is the fact that people still have the gall to venture into this city. And bypassers or snoopers, it detracts from the truly important matters at hand."*

"Anyhow," Cal said. "I still haven't heard anything from Callous..."

"That's probably for the best." Metal shrugged, as he closed his eyes. *"...frankly, I'm not sure if we can leave the black emerald and her alone for too long. That's why..."* As he spoke, he knocked his hand against his own chest. *"...I'm keeping it in here, as a temporary solution, until I can find something it can be sealed in."*

"...what if it starts to react to something?" Cal asked. "The real Chaos Emeralds tend to come alive in certain situations; what if that applies to that black one as well?"

"That's why this is only a temporary solution; in case something like that could happen." Metal said, as he rubbed his chin. *"...but I've been thinking and thinking, and nothing seems to come to mind... you wouldn't happen to have any ideas, Calculate?"*

"Well, I've been studying up as much as I can to see if I can find a way," Cal said, adjusting his glasses. "...there are some interesting

things I've dug up. For instance, Dr. Eggman's research. It talks about once how the emeralds lost their power, but they were restored, and I believe he had explained that it was the time when he awakened this Dark Gaia." The monkey then paced around. "...I wondered if the same thing that restored them could take the power away again, and whether or not it would work with that black emerald, or what effects it might have, but it's a theory..."

"...a theory..." Metal muttered, as he scratched his head. *"...but it is risky. I can't take the chance of the emerald's host breaking loose, so we need something that cannot... be... opened..."* As he spoke, something suddenly dawned on him. *"...of course! How on earth could I have forgotten that design?"*

Cal looked curiously at Metal. "Design?" he questioned. "What design?"

"Look at this, Cal." Looking at an empty space, Metal suddenly activated a pair of holographic projectors, showing a large, grey capsule with a button on top. *"That is the Egg Capsule; a device Eggman used to contain prisoners of his."*

"I see," Cal said. "So you plan to stow the emerald away in one of these?"

"That's the idea." Metal said, as he shut off the projectors. *"You see, the capsules can only be opened in two ways... one, by wearing it down with a material stronger than it, and two, activating the release mechanism; that's the purpose of the button."* Then, he tapped the top of his head. *"But, one thing Eggman never thought of, was to eliminate the release mechanism. I intend to do just that; stow it in a miniature Egg Capsule, remove the release mechanism, and store it in a place I know no one but me can reach it."*

"Well, it still leaves the possibility of someone being able to break it," Cal muttered, "but then again, what are the chances?"

"Quite few, actually." Metal said, as he folded his arms. *"Coincidentally, the material that the Egg Capsules are made out of,*

happens to be the strongest material Eggman ever produced. It's only weak point is the release mechanism, and with that taken out of the equation, it won't matter how strong you are; the capsule cannot be opened by anything even remotely weaker than that material."

"Sounds good," Cal said with a nod. "If that's taken care of, then what do we do about that stray android, in the case that Callous either failed or wasn't really hunting it down?"

"At the moment..." Metal said, as he placed a hand on Cal's shoulder. *"...that'll be your responsibility. The only place there are any Egg Capsules is back in Metropolis, so while I'm gone, you're going to have to stay in charge here until I return."*

Cal just blinked, before he sighed. "Fun..." Knowing Callous, if she ever came back when Metal was still gone, who knows if she might take advantage of that, but Cal just kept it to himself.

"In any case, I'll head off to Metropolis now." Metal said, as he began walking away from Cal, before stopping. *"...remember, you are an android. Though you still retain human characteristics..."* he said, as he glanced at the monkey. *"...you're designed to be able to suppress those characteristics. Do not let your emotions drag you down until I return. That's an order."* Then, he took to the sky.

Cal had almost forgotten about that, and while the advice was somewhat comforting, he hoped there wouldn't be a situation where he was required of it.

"We're calling him Proxy," Milo said to the other kids, as they were all gathered around the android.

Ani and Rudy were up close, observing it, while Striker did his best to keep his distance. "So, he's with us now?" Striker asked, just as Milo nodded.

"Cool!" Rudy remarked.

"Proxy..." Jack mused, as he cautiously poked Proxy's head a bit. "Why is he called that?"

"In essence, proxy can mean 'replacement', which I suppose is what I am, so to speak." Proxy said with a shrug. "In any case, it looks like I'll be spending my time with all of you."

"So how much are you like Shadow?" Ani asked curiously. "Do you remember any of the stuff he does?"

"Well... I can do this." Proxy said with a smirk, when he suddenly poofed away.

"Woah! He vanished!" Jack said in utter awe, as he looked around. "Where'd he go?"

"Right behind you." At that point, Proxy poofed back into view right behind Jack, placing a hand on the lion's shoulder to prove it. "What do you think?"

"That was awesome!" Rudy exclaimed, hopping up and down. "What was that?!"

"That is Chaos Control." Proxy said, as he held out his hand, just as a red aura surrounded the hand. "It can allow the user to not only fire projectiles and enhance their strength and other senses, but it can let them warp through space and time. Though, without a Chaos Emerald, the most I can do is shooting and warping short distances."

"Just like Shadow..." Striker murmured, looking sad. Noticing this, Buddy poked at him. "Chao?"

"What's wrong Striker?" Milo asked.

"...I miss Shadow guys," he said.

"...we're all missing Uncle Shadow, Striker." Jack said, as he placed a hand on Striker's shoulder. "But... he-"

"Actually..." Proxy said, as he crouched down so he could look at Striker. "...I'm pretty sure that Shadow misses you guys as well... but

he also wants you to press on, and not let the lack of his presence drag you down." After he said that, he blinked, placing a finger against his own throat. *...did I just say that?* he thought.

The kids looked at him. Milo didn't say anything about it even if he might have known what happened.

After awhile, Striker nodded, "Okay. I won't be sad."

Boomer just watched them out of the corner of her eye to be sure they were alright. It was strange how quickly attached the kids got to Proxy, but they were young. They didn't think about being careful of things that came from bad places, but it looked like things were okay so far. Once everyone was up to date about Proxy, there had been some disagreements here and there, but now it seemed that things had settled down so far. Still, she wondered just how a lone android escaped from Metal's lab, let alone the fact that it had an incredible free will, unlike the previous androids.

Boomer also knew that Jill didn't pick the name "Proxy" out of random; it had a hidden meaning. Something was going on that the others weren't aware of, and in some ways, she didn't like that.

"So, what do you make of him?" she'd hear Wiper ask, as he stood with his back against a wall, glancing at Boomer. "About Proxy, I mean."

"I don't know," Boomer said. "He seems to be alright, but I still have my doubts..." By then, she lowered her voice so she wouldn't be heard by the kids, "I'm still wondering why Jill and Milo are acting the way they are around him; almost like he was an old friend."

"I'm actually more content knowing that he won't suddenly start attacking us." Wiper shrugged, as he closed his eyes, yawning lightly. "As for why they treat him more like a close friend... have you tried asking Jill or Milo about it?"

"Both," Boomer said. "When I asked Jill, her only reply was 'don't worry about it,' and when I asked Milo, he didn't make any sense, saying something about 'seeing truth,' in him." Anyone who knew Boomer, knew that if there was something she didn't know, she'd get

irritated about it. She felt the exact same way right now.

"So they're gonna be cryptic about it..." Wiper muttered, as he sighed. "If it'll make it better, I'll see if I can't get something out of Jill later."

"Really, you'd do that?" Boomer questioned, raising a brow.

"Why not?" Wiper replied with a shrug. "If there's something she's not telling, chances are that it's important. In any case, I'll ask her about it later."

Boomer just looked at Wiper, until she rose up from her seat. "I'm going to see if Brick discovered any more emeralds," she said.

Chapter 22

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"This the place, Sage?" Hunter asked.

"It should be." Sage noted, as she looked up at what basically amounted to a castle. "I'll say, King's strong points never included subtlety... will you go in first, or should I?"

"You go ahead," Hunter said, "and I'll follow you."

"Alright. Coming through!" Sage said, as she glanced at the gate, before it opened up, all without her moving a muscle. Then, she walked through, glancing back at Hunter to see if he'd follow her.

True to his word, he followed her, just as his curious eye began to wander around the sights.

"Hello? Is there anyone here?" Sage called, as she glanced around the surroundings to see if anyone even was there.

"That voice..." they'd hear a somber female voice say, coming from the top of a long stairwell. "Is that really you, Sage?"

"Hunter too," the wolf threw in. "That you Miser?"

There was no reply. Instead, someone leapt right from the top of the stairs, several stories down, before landing right in front of Hunter and Sage, though as this person landed, one could hear bones shattering throughout her entire body.

"OW!" Sage winced just watching that fall, as she looked at the figure with some concern. "...you alright?"

"...as always." Getting up to her feet, Miser looked at both Hunter and Sage, smiling weakly. "It's good to see you two."

"Yeah, it's nice to see you too, Miser," Hunter said, not bothering to ask why she did that. "Are the others here too?"

"...no." Miser said, as she scratched her arm guiltily. "King left some time ago, and Ripper's been looking for him..."

"Hrm. That's a shame." Sage muttered, as she rubbed her temples.

"...but this is great!" Then, Miser suddenly grabbed both Hunter and Sage in a hug. "We only need Dawn and Dusk... and everyone will be together again! Isn't that wonderful to think of?"

Hunter's reaction to her hug was surprise, but to her statement, it was concern. "Miser, there's something I aught to tell you," he said, pulling away.

Hearing that, Miser looked at Hunter. "...what is it?" she asked.

Oh dear... this isn't going to be pretty. Sage thought, as she looked away from Miser.

Knowing the way Miser was, Hunter knew that he had to start with more positive news first. "...I have a daughter," he said.

"You have?" Miser asked, a clearly surprised expression on her face. "That's... that's wonderful! Congratulations!" she said with a smile. "What's her name?"

"Anistasia," Hunter replied.

"Oh, that is a beautiful name." Miser said with a sigh, as she closed her eyes. "...would it be too much to ask if I could introduce myself to her?"

"Actually, that won't be a problem at all, considering that she's with Wiper," Hunter said, "but because of that...I can't be part of King's plans." There, he said it, but before Miser had a chance to freak out, he had to reason. "I've been through a lot Miser, and the kind of thing King is brainstorming will put my only daughter in danger, and I don't want to do that to her..."

Just by looking at her, one could tell that the instant Hunter had said that he couldn't be part of King's plot, Miser's spirits had been thoroughly destroyed. "...but..." she began, stuttering. "But... you can still stay here... right?" As she spoke, her eyes began watering up.

"I-I can see if I can't work out something with King... you won't have to help us... and you can bring your daughter here, as well. So... can't you..."

Sage glanced at Miser, noting the utterly crushed look she had, despite trying to act normal. *...poor girl...* she thought.

"Miser," Hunter said, sighing with despair as he set his hands on her shoulders. "There's something about my daughter that might make her a potential target, especially by that Callous woman." He looked right at her. "Miser, I promise that it won't change anything between all of us. We can still be friends, all of us."

"...but..." Miser said, as she desperately tried withholding her tears. "...but... even so, we... we won't be together... we'll be separated... again..."

Just then, Sage blinked, as she glanced around her. *...something's coming...* she thought. *...or someone.*

"Aw, so sad..."

Hunter jumped, feeling that hair-raising presence of that power, and turning, he saw Callous leaning up against the wall casually. "Let me give you a hint Miser," she said, as she got off the wall and started approaching them, "life is full of hardships and tradegy, but it is up to one to determine how much they want to weigh that factor in life."

"What the hell are you doing here?!" Hunter demanded, as his unusual rage arose.

"I'm on business of my own, but I'm just passing through," Callous said, smirking. "And I couldn't help but hear your conversation."

"...her again...?" Miser uttered.

"Tsch-" Quickly, before Callous could move, Sage spread her wings open, as Callous would suddenly feel her entire body freezing in place. "I'm beginning to grow a bit annoyed with you sticking your nose in everywhere. Can't you take a hint?"

"Relax, I'm not here to do anything to you," she groaned, though the

fact that Sage froze her in place sure irritated the heck out of her.

Hunter walked right up to Callous, growling in her face, "now, just what kind of business are you on?!"

"If you really want to know, a lone Shadow Android escaped from our lab," Callous grumbled.

"Shadow Android?" Sage noted, as she tilted her head. "...and what made you think that you'd find one of those up here? Apart from this castle, this is a dead zone."

As the group conversed, Miser kept her eyes glued onto Callous. *That woman...* she thought. *...she's the one... who's keeping Hunter from reuniting with us...*

" Give me a break, I was just looking," Callous replied sourly.

"How did an android escape?" demanded Hunter doubtfully.

Callous eyed Hunter, before she replied. "Something happened to it; the Corruption started to tamper with it, and now its roaming around freely."

"Roaming, huh..." Sage noted, as her eyes narrowed. "Well, you're not gonna find him here. I suggest you go look somewhere-"

"Wait." Miser said, as her eyes were closed, but one could tell that she wasn't too happy. "...you're Callous... right?" she asked.

Blinking, Sage looked at Miser. *Uh oh... she's not really going to...* she thought.

"Duh," Callous replied.

Hunter also suspected what might happen, but he didn't say anything.

"...I see." Miser nodded, as she cracked her neck, before reaching for the railgun on her back. "Then, if you perish... my friends and I can..."

"Miser, don't!" Sage called to the rhino. "Callous may not look like it, but she's out of even your league! You could-"

"There have been none who could vanquish me yet." Miser interrupted, as she aimed the massive gun at Callous, electricity crackling around it. "But I've always welcomed an opportunity to face death in person." Then, she fired a massive blast at Callous.

Hunter, being in the way, jumped aside the instant that she fired.

Since Sage had neglected to concentrate on keeping Callous frozen, she was free to move. In the blink of an eye, Callous brought out her large scythe and deflected the beam by twirling the staff of her scythe. After it hit a wall, Callous shot Miser a smirk. "So you want to die, hm?" she chuckled. "I think I can do that." Just as soon as enough Corruption energy coated the blade on her scythe, she rushed at Miser more rapidly than it called for.

However, as Callous rushed at Miser, all of a sudden, Miser blocked the attack by pressing her railgun against the handle of the scythe, keeping the blade from her. "A scythe may be a sign of incoming harvest..." she muttered, as she lowered her head. "...but for conventional means, it is an impractical weapon." Then, without giving Callous time to move, Miser proceeded to ram her horns into Callous' body.

Callous didn't need to move. Miser's horns met with a barrier of Corruption instead, as Callous' smirk grew. "Funny you should mention harvest," she said. "I believe that this scythe can harvest *souls* ." And being close enough to her, Callous grabbed Miser.

"Shit!" Hunter uttered, struggling to get up and stop her.

But even before he could get up, Callous released her scythe and lodged a Corruption-coated hand into her abdomen. "It doesn't matter if you're immortal, Miser," she chuckled. "Shadow was immortal too, but he died..."

"... he was only immortal in age." Miser uttered, as while Callous held a grip on Miser, she suddenly grabbed Callous' hand so she couldn't move aside, before aiming her railgun at the ewe. "I have

been cursed with the gift of true immortality... no wound can kill me, no matter how grievous." Then, basically at point-blank, Miser fired a volley from the massive weapon.

That threw Callous back a few feet, but she was quick to get back onto her feet. "Maybe you can't be killed, but you endure a true suffering no one can imagine," she said, wiping away her bloody nose. "I've overheard how everyone talks about you. You search of a way to die, to end all that suffering." While retrieving her scythe, they would begin to feel a very unnatural air occur, as Callous' frizzy hair began to float freely. The next thing they knew, her eyes turned red. "I happen to be immortal myself Miser," she said. "So if you have any plans of trying to kill me, it won't be anytime soon, unfortunately. There's only one that can truly kill me."

"Then I will find this person." Miser said, as she aimed her railgun at Callous again. "If your death means that my friends and I can be together again... then it will happen."

"That's enough." Suddenly, a powerful surge of energy suddenly erupted from Sage, as she floated up in the air, her entire body surrounded by some form of aura, and her eyes glowing blue. "We might not be able to kill you, Callous, but you have yet to see me when I lose my temper. You're not welcome here, so leave. NOW."

Callous cared less about Sage, but her own fury died down to the point where her eyes turned back green, and her scythe departed in black smog. "Fine," she said. "But I'm not the one keeping your friends apart Miser; Jillian is."

"WHAT?!" Hunter couldn't believe what he just heard.

"You see, Wiper won't join you anytime soon because he can't leave her," Callous said, walking away. "So I suggest you find a way to deal with her, rather than me." And with that, Callous was gone into the darkness without another sound.

"...Jillian..." Miser muttered, as she looked down into the ground. "...who is that?"

When Callous left, Sage's aura faded, as she glanced at Miser.

"...don't listen to Callous, Miser. She means only to deceive you."

"But..." Miser uttered, as she clenched her hands. "...Jillian... if she is keeping Wiper from us... then we can't stay together..."

"Miser, no," Hunter said. But unfortunately, he wouldn't convince her that Callous was wrong; Wiper told him that his assignment was pretty much to be their bodyguard for the month, and even to make sure nothing happened to Jill. "...you can't Miser!" he said.

"And why not?!" Miser suddenly snapped, glaring intensely at Hunter, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "Is it too much to want the only people who cared for you to be together once more?! Is it too much to want one's family to be reunited?!"

"Miser, calm down!" Sage called, but it wasn't enough, as Miser suddenly ran past Hunter, towards the entrance. "MISER!"

"Forgive me..." Miser said, before she fully disappeared. "...but our family shall be whole again!" Then, she was gone.

"Shit!" Sage cursed, as she glanced at Hunter. "Hurry up and catch up with her! Things could get ugly if she reaches the HQ!"

"You're telling me!" Hunter growled. "I can't believe that Callous bitch just pulled a fast one like that!" And with as much speed as he could muster, he ran after Miser. "MISER!!!" he roared.

...hopefully, he can actually stop her. Sage thought, as she closed her eyes. *...but there's only one person that she'd willingly listen to...* Then, ensuring that Hunter and Miser couldn't see her, she took to the sky, before flying in a different direction. *Hope you can forgive me... but I have to find King!*

However, in spite of Miser carrying around her rail gun, she was still quicker than Hunter was, with only one goal in mind; taking Wiper home, no matter who stood in her path.

"Miser, NO!" Hunter bellowed. He couldn't let her, knowing what she might do to Jill. *Not while my daughter's there, please!* He thought in despair.

"Okay, ready for the next faze, Ani?" Charmy whispered, chuckling. "Our goal is to put one in a situation where the other feels compelled to act for their safety, but be careful alright? I think Boomer's onto us..."

Nodding, both Ani and Charmy crept toward the doorway to peek in.

"No emeralds, huh?" Boomer asked Brick, who was searching on the radar.

"Not that I found yet," Brick replied without taking his eyes off the screen of the radar. "Hey Newt, how's your search on the nation-scale radar?"

"Still lookin', y'know." Newt replied, as he observed the radar, when he noticed something. "...hey, I think I spotted somethin'! There's a signal travelin' towards... Metropolis?"

"Metropolis?" Brick said. "But that's been abandoned since..." that moment, Brick made a connection. "...you know, I think its Metal Sonic with an emerald," he said.

"That would make sense," Boomer said. "I guess once Eggman was gone, he took over the place for himself." Then she sighed. "Geez, that's going to make getting the emeralds a lot harder than we thought."

"See that giant paint can up there?" Charmy whispered with a point. Sure enough, a giant can of paint was sitting on a high shelf on the wall; convieniantly placed near Boomer. "If you can topple it over slowly enough for Newt to notice..."

"I catch your drift," Ani muttered, as she concentrated. At first, it just twitched slightly, but then it started to scoot near the edge of the shelf.

"For all we know, Metal may have already collected some emeralds," Brick grumbled.

"Probably, yeah." Newt muttered, as he checked the screen again. "...there's another one, but it's movin' around quite a bit. My guess is

that it's Sage, y'know." As he said that, he happened to glance in Boomer's direction, seeing the paint can slowly move towards the edge, though Boomer didn't seem to notice it. "...huh?" At that moment, he stood up and quickly pulled Boomer out of the way, before the paint can fell. "That was a close one..."

"?!" Boomer was pretty surprised to see that paint can fall, and instead of her, the paint splattered all over Brick instead. The bull was covered in white paint, and ticking mad like a time bomb, but Boomer didn't notice that. She looked up at Newt. "...uh, thanks," she uttered.

"Er... no prob." Newt replied, as he glanced at Brick. "...maybe you oughta take a break, Brick?" he suggested, noting just how steamed Brick looked.

Ani covered her mouth to keep from laughing about the turn of events. Brick looked priceless in white paint, and she thought it was hilarious to see him all steamed up.

Brick stood up from where he sat, as he swatted the paint off his arms. "I think I'll do that..." he groaned, walking out of the room. It was then that he caught Ani and Charmy in the hall, but the two started whistling on cue; acting like they had no idea what happened. Brick didn't care though, as he walked down the hall to clean himself.

Boomer raised an eye brow. "I wonder how these accidents keep happening..."

"Me too..." Newt muttered, as he picked up the paint can, observing it a bit closer. "...you know, it's weird, but this thing looked like it was movin' on its own, even when it shouldn't be able to do it, y'know. Weird, ain't it?"

Boomer paused to think about it. *Moving on its own* , she thought. … *wait a minute.*

Charmy knew the look Boomer had while thinking. *Looks like we should be more careful,* he thought, while turning around to Ani. "Alright Ani, let's—huh?!" Charmy then discovered that Ani wasn't

there at all. "Ani?"

In reality, the little husky-wolf was rushing through the halls with a hand on her stomach. It was starting to swell and ache again; a sign that she sensed something bad was about to happen. She didn't know exactly what, but she felt like Jill might be in danger for some reason; that, and a more inner, personal feeling about something else was growing. Problem was, she didn't know what at all.

She entered into a room where Cream was seated, reading a book, when she noticed Ani. "What's wrong, dear? Stomach-ache?" she asked.

"Grandma Cream, quick! Where's Jill?!" Ani asked, ignoring Cream's question.

Seeing that Ani looked a little scared, Cream grew concerned. "She's outside training again," she answered. "Ani, is something wrong?" Ani then ran out of the room, not bothering to answer. "Ani?!" Cream called, standing up.

As Ani ran out of the room, she just passed by Natal, who glanced at her with a dumbfounded look, before looking inside the room with Cream. "Is she alright?" she asked the elderly rabbit.

"I don't know," Cream replied. "She just asked me where Jill was, and when I told her that she was outside, she darted out."

This time, instead of wandering into the thick woods, Jill remained right outside the HQ building. A couple balls of bright, white lights were rotating above her hand, which made a continuous motion in a circle. However, Jill wasn't even paying attention to that. She was thinking about what Hunter said.

...Did he really see my mother? She thought.

"Hey," Wiper's voice behind her would likely derail her train of thought, as the snake was leaning against a wall. "Can I ask you a question, Jill?"

"Sure," she said, looking up at him. "What is it?"

"Well..." he began, as he closed his eyes, "...it's about Proxy. There's something you and Milo aren't telling us about him." Then, he opened his eyes slightly. "And frankly, when you keep a secret, it's bound to be important. So, what is the deal with Proxy?"

"I figured you'd be asking questions too," Jill chuckled. She let her hand rest, just as the balls of light dispersed away into the air. "Well, I'm not sure if people are ready to believe it or not, so if I tell you, can you keep it quiet?"

"...I suppose." Wiper replied with a shrug. "Now, what is it that's so important that the others aren't ready for yet?"

"That android," Jill started, looking back up at Wiper, "It might be hard to believe…but it's the *real* Shadow."

"...what?" Wiper uttered flatly. "You mean... *the* Shadow? ...actually, I'm not going to question it. I'll just take your word for it, and leave it at that."

"It's just weird," Jill said. "But Milo can see spiritual energy…so technically, he saw Shadow's spirit in the android. That's why he didn't panic. As to why I believe him…well, it'd be too much of a headache to explain."

There she goes again, calling us a headache, muttered another voice in her head.

Hush, she said in her mind.

"Headache, huh..." Wiper muttered, as he closed his eyes. Then, he smirked. "Alright, Jill; I'll spare you the trouble of explaining it. I'm sure it can wait until later."

However, his smirk instantly faded immediately thereafter, as he opened his eyes. "...did you hear that?"

Jill stood up slowly, waiting to hear what Wiper might've heard, but —

"JILL!" cried Ani, as she hurried around to them. "Jill! You have to get back inside!"

"Ani?!" Jill was startled by how scared Ani looked; the little husky-wolf even grabbed Jill tightly. "What's wrong Ani?!"

"I don't know!" Ani cried, "But you have to hurry back inside! Now!"

"Why is that, Ani?" Wiper asked, but suddenly, he glanced towards the horizon. "...damn!" Quickly, he grabbed both Jill and Ani, before leaping into the HQ, just as a massive beam struck the area just outside the building; thankfully not actually hitting the building.

Jill was utterly surprised by that; so much in fact, that she didn't move.

Ani, in the meantime, broke from Wiper as she crept back out the door to see who it was that shot at them.

And as the smoke cleared, she'd see who it was pretty clearly, even though she wouldn't know her identity; Miser. "COME OUT, JILLIAN!" she yelled, as she aimed her railgun at the HQ. "FACE ME ON THE BATTLEFIELD!"

Hearing that voice, Wiper glanced out the door, and got a surprised look on his face. "Wha... that's Miser! Why is she attacking us?"

"Miser, STOP!" cried another voice, though he screeched to a halt to discover that she had already gotten there.

"That's Hunter!" Jill said, getting back up to her feet.

"Don't get yourself involved, Midnight!" Miser called to Hunter, as she kept glaring at the building. "This is between me and Jillian! So come out, and face me!"

"...what's wrong with her?" Wiper uttered, as he could only look at the rhino in confusion. "I've never seen her that enraged before... and why does she want to fight Jill?"

"I guess there's only one way to find out," Jill muttered, stepping outside the door and into view where Miser could see her.

"Jill, wait!" Ani called, following after her.

Hunter saw Ani, and he became even more worried. *She better not shoot them right there on the spot!* He thought with intense fury. If Miser even tried to shoot his daughter, not even he knew what he'd do…

"I hear your name is Miser!" Jill called. "What do you want with me?"

"Have I not made myself clear to you?" Miser called back, as she actually lowered her railgun. "I wish to fight you! Unless I defeat you, my family cannot be whole! So come at me with all your might!"

"...oh no..." Wiper muttered, as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "This isn't going to be pretty. Ani, I want you to hide inside. Don't come out unless I say you can, alright?"

Ani was torn. She really wanted to help Jill and knew that it wouldn't be smart to leave her alone. Then, she figured she could get the others to help, so Ani finally nodded and rushed inside, running down the halls to gather everyone else up.

"Miser, listen," Jill called. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I don't want to fight you!"

"You're going to have to, Jillian!" Miser called back, as she glared at the ewe. "I would never fire at someone who hasn't raised their weapon, but I cannot allow you to keep my family from reuniting! So draw your weapon, and come at me!"

Family from reuniting? What does she mean? Jill thought.

"Miser! You've got to listen to me!!!" Hunter roared at the rhino. "She is NOT your enemy!!!"

"Do not get between us, Midnight!" Miser called back, without letting her eyes off Jill. "Now, do I have to repeat myself? Come at me, already!"

It doesn't look like she's going to listen to anything, Jill thought in observation.

Then give her what she wants, suggested another voice in her mind.

You sure that's a good idea Sonic? Jill asked in her mind.

If you end up beating her in battle, then maybe she'll listen to ya, he replied. *That's always what happened with me.*

If you say so, Jill thought, opening her palm. In a flicker of light, her bow was in her hands. "Alright Miser," she said. "I'll fight you." Then she shot a few golden arrows straight at the rhino.

However, unlike just about anyone Jill had faced up to this point, Miser stood perfectly still, letting the arrows pierce her body. But even with arrows sticking out of her, she didn't lose the glare. "...not enough." she muttered, as she lifted the railgun again, aiming at Jill. "That's not enough to finish me!" Then, she fired a beam right at Jill.

Jill was surprised to see Miser undaunted by the arrows like that, and she was quick to leap out of the fire of the railgun.

Hunter felt helpless, but she ran around the field to the HQ. "Wiper!" He said, once he reached the snake. "Callous passed by our base, and when she told Miser that Jill was keeping you from coming back to King, she started freaking out!"

Jill decided to step up a little, and as her bow departed, it was replaced with her holy blade. Then she came at Miser with a vertical slice from above.

"She did *what?!* " Wiper said, before he gritted his teeth. "Damn... and on someone like Miser, it's absolutely guaranteed to work." he muttered. "Crap... if she wasn't in such a rage, we could have persuaded her to..." Then, he blinked, before he glanced at Hunter. "Wait... wasn't Sage with you?"

However, as Jill brought the blade down, Miser actually parried the blow with her horns, and despite bleeding from her forehead as a result of the blow, she was still energetic enough to attempt to punch Jill.

"I didn't even think about that," Hunter said, in realization. "I left her behind…"

Jill was sent back through the air, landing on her back harshly as

she clutched her stomach where Miser had punched.

But before Miser would have the chance to attack Jill again, something else fired from nowhere, which appeared to be a giant bubble-gum bubble.

"GUN agent or not," called a tough voice, "You don't have the right to pick on my friends!!!" It turned out to be Boomer at the top of the building with one of her guns.

However, even with the large bubble striking her dead-on, Miser wasn't even phased by it. "Don't get involved, duckling!" she said, before aiming her railgun at Jill. "As soon as I've accomplished what I came here to do, I will be done with this place!" Then, she fired at Jill again.

Having a moment to recover, Jill rolled over the moment she saw Miser fire at her again, and then she got back onto her feet.

"You don't have the right to tell me what I can and can't do," growled Boomer to herself, as she ran toward the edge of the building. Then, she jumped, and after a long fall, she landed on her feet at the ground.

Seeing that, Hunter blinked. "…how the hell did she do that?" he questioned.

"Boomer, don't!" Jill said. "I don't want you getting hurt!" Then she lunged at Miser again, but with more slices from different angles such as above, behind, and at the sides.

But as much as Jill struck the rhino, Miser was still not fazed by the slashes, even as numerous wounds appeared on her body as a result of Jill's onslaught. Then, she suddenly grabbed hold of Jill's sword in mid-slash. "Even someone who's keeping my family separated cannot kill me..." she muttered, before throwing Jill to the ground.

"Tsch..." Wiper grunted, before looking at Boomer. "Listen, me and Hunter know Miser more than anyone else here. You can't hope to stop her, Boomer; she's a walking tank!" Just as he said that, Newt

and Natal appeared in the doorway behind Wiper, much to his surprise. "Hn?"

"I don't freakin' care Wiper!" Boomer replied, aiming her gun at Miser as she threw Jill onto the ground. "It's our job! I'd rather fight than watch this go on!"

"I agree whole-heartedly!" Brick said, as he appeared too. Then he started charging after Miser without warning, aiming his horns. "Leave her alone!!!" he bellowed.

"Brick, no!!!" Jill cried. *Geez people, can't you just let me handle it?!* She thought.

As Brick charged at Miser, however, she actually decided to dodge, by simply shifting her body away from where Brick charged, as she approached Jill. "It doesn't matter who shows up; I won't stop until you're dead!" she said, as she raised her fist, intending to crush Jill, when...

"Chaos Spear!" Suddenly, a blast of energy knocked Miser away from Jill, but even though she wasn't pained by that attack, it did prevent her from attacking Jill. "Sorry, but I'd rather that you leave her be." As it turned out, Proxy now stood outside the HQ as well, having shot a blast at Miser from there.

"Alright, we're gonna go and kick her ass, y'know!" Newt said, as he and Natal were quick to run past Wiper, despite the foe they were up against.

...you're kidding... the snake thought, as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Chapter 23

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jill got up and stepped back. Then she turned to everyone. "STOP!" she screamed. "What does it take to tell you guys that I can handle it myself?!"

"It didn't look that way," Brick commented.

This was the opportunity for Boomer to start firing her gun at Miser again. Hopefully if the bubble-gum bubbles hit Miser, they'd stick her to the ground to keep her from moving.

"Go Boomer!" called Rudy, who hopped out along with the rest of the kids.

Even as Boomer shot at Miser, the rhino merely shrugged the blows off, glaring back at Jill. "You're on your own here, Jillian!" she said, as she began running towards her, in spite of the bubble-gum slowing her down.

"WOOOOO!!" Suddenly, Newt stepped in front of Miser, throwing a punch at the rhino, but while it did nothing to actually harm her, she did stop, catching the fist before Newt could retract it. "Listen, I don't care if you're one of the field commanders; I ain't gonna let you hurt these guys, y'know?!"

As he said that, Natal leapt right towards Miser, her nodachi held firmly with her tongue, which she lashed at the rhino, though Miser only had to raise her arm to block the attack. "Hrm..."

Jill was merely observing what was going on, wondering how in the world Miser could take so much.

"That's disturbing," Brick remarked, staring at Miser with widened eyes.

"Well, Miser is immortal after all," Hunter said.

"She's WHAT?!" Brick asked, reacting with shock.

So that's it, Jill thought. But as she watched the battle, as she watched everyone trying to get involved, she only got more annoyed. Then it started to grow into anger. *I didn't want everyone to try to help me,* she thought. *I wanted to simply fight her so I could ask her why she's so angry! Now it's just a big mess!*

She wasn't aware of it, but ominous storm clouds were beginning to brew overhead, as her anger started to grow. The winds started to pick up as well.

Being the first to notice this, Brick looked around in bewilderment. Then he glanced at Jill. "…Brownie?"

With one swift movement, Miser was quick to repel both Natal and Newt, before she looked at Jill, just as she noticed what was going on. *...what in the name of...?*

Jill slowly rose into the air, and by now, it was calling everyone else's attention, as the winds started to swirl around her. She also glared very sharply at Miser.

"…what the hell?!" Hunter said, watching this.

"Whoa, what's going on with Jill?!" Striker asked, from atop the building. Suddenly, beside them, Cream, Charmy and Tails would run out to their side to see what was going on.

"Oh my…" Cream uttered, seeing everything.

Like before, Jill took on a godly glow just as the winds increased in power.

Looking at Jill, Tails gritted his teeth. *Is she losing control of her emotions...?* he thought.

Even with the increase of the wind and the glow Jill took, Miser returned the glare right back at the ewe, before she lifted her railgun again. "I don't know what you're doing, but it will not intimidate me!" she yelled, as she fired another round at Jill.

Jill swatted it away simply by her hand, just as the blast from the railgun hit the side, digging up a crater. "I'm not trying to intimidate you!" she screamed with a godly echo. "I'M TRYING TO GET YOUR ATTENTION!!!" Then she was consumed completely in bright light, growing brighter like before until that powerful force shot out.

The impact would send a lot of them onto their backs. It did so for Brick and Hunter, as they were the closest to Jill and they were unprepared for it.

"Brownie?!" Brick shouted.

Just about everyone else was blown a bit away from the immense surge of power also, but again, Miser hardly seemed phased by it, even as she was being pushed back. "So you finally decide to fight back?!" she yelled, as she pretty much began unloading round after round at where she assumed Jill was.

But each round Miser fired was simply deflected by balls of white energy that surrounded the mass of light; even to the point where the light died down, revealing that white figure.

"Oh my god…" Boomer uttered, when she saw her.

Like that night she had fought Metal Sonic; the white energies swirled around her, showing off her green wings of energy. Then she opened her eyes, showing that the white in her eyes had turned green; like an alien. They were also angry as ever, as this white being glared down at Miser. *"Whatever happened to you Miser, doesn't give you the excuse to act selfish!"* she said. Purity energy wrapped around her arms, and as she uncrossed them, they shot out in two massive beams heading straight for Miser.

But again, Miser didn't bother moving from where she stood, taking the beams head-on, without even flinching. "...I'm being selfish?" she uttered, as she threw the railgun to the ground, glaring at the holy figure. "So what if I am?! You have no idea what we've been through!" Then, she ran right at Jill, a frightening roar bellowing out of her.

" *You have no idea what I've been through either, Miser!"* Jill said.

"You actually had friends; I had to endure my hardships alone!" She raised her palm, and a blinding light began to build up in it.

"Whoa! Jill's like an angel!" said Striker, pointing at her.

"And….and she's p-powerful," Milo uttered, quivering. "…she's scaring me…"

Jill then sent the light upon Miser, which may not affect her in terms of pain, but it would strike her right in the face, aiming to severely blind her.

Indeed, the blow struck Miser, but even as she lost bearing of where she was running, she still kept running at Jill. "So you compensate by stealing away others to be with you?!" she yelled, as she leapt right at where she assumed Jill would be, intending to tackle her to the ground.

But seeing as Miser was blind, Jill simply swayed aside, allowing Miser to tackle down the ground instead. *"I did not steal anyone from you Miser,"* Jill said. *"It was their choice to stand with me!"* With Miser on the ground, Jill brought out her blade again and tried to stab her right in the back; being immortal, it luckily wouldn't be fatal.

As the blade rammed through Miser's back, she quickly glanced behind her; though she couldn't see, the way the blade impaled her gave her the incentive to grab hold of the hilt. "Don't feed me your lies! Why would anyone-"

"Miser!" After what had seemed like an eternity, Wiper finally spoke up, as he approached the scene of the battle "That's enough. Go home, already."

"...Dawn?" Miser uttered, as she glanced at where she assumed his voice came from. "Is... is that you?"

Jill kept the blade placed there, knowing it kept Miser pinned down. *At least now, she'll listen,* she thought with some relief.

Those like Milo and Striker turned away when Jill stabbed Miser like that. Even if Miser couldn't die, it was just too gruesome of a sight to handle as they buried their faces into Cream's skirt.

"Miser, listen..." Wiper began, as he stopped while standing over the rhino, looking down at her. "I was given a mission, to watch over and make sure that Jillian wasn't harmed. Trust me when I say that if something was to befall her, we'd be in a lot of trouble."

As Wiper spoke, Miser seemed to calm down somewhat, though one could tell that she was utterly conflicted. "But... why-"

"Also..." Wiper continued, as he folded his arms. "...I've told King several times that I have no interest in his plans... but that doesn't change the fact that we'll be comrades, Sunset."

Hearing that name, Miser shut her eyes, looking away from Wiper. "...really...?" she uttered.

At that point, Jill finally pulled the blade out of Miser's back, awaiting whatever would happen next.

And what happened was that Miser rolled on her back, looking up at the sky. "...what a fool I am." she muttered. "Why would I just not listen to reason...?" Then, she closed her eyes. "...and she couldn't kill me, either... the tragic comedy continues..."

"..." Sighing, Wiper closed his eyes as well.

Since that was settled, Jill took Miser by the hand and picked her up onto her feet. *"Here,"* she said, putting her hands onto her shoulders. As a white glow took to her hands, a white glow surrounded Miser. All of her wounds automatically healed within seconds, and even her temporary blindness was cured.

Miser blinked, as she looked at Jill. "...thank you..." she muttered, before looking away.

"Well, seems like I wasn't needed." Hearing that voice, Miser suddenly looked up at the sky again, letting her see three characters up above them; King, Sage and Ripper. "Good to see that you've calmed down, Miser," King said with a nod.

Jill turned and looked silently at the group that gathered up in the air.

"So you went and got King, Sage?" Hunter growled, folding his

arms. *Great…that's just what we need,* he thought.

"Well, he *is* the leader, so to speak, so I figured that he could stop Miser." Sage said, as she, along with Ripper and King, descended to ground level. "But I was wrong, which is a first."

Without even bothering to glance at Hunter or Wiper, King walked next to Miser, looking down at her. "...it was Callous, wasn't it?" he said, which made both Miser and Wiper, and likely a lot more people, look right at him.

" *Yes it was,"* Jill answered surly.

"...to think, that she'd go as far as deceive one of my comrades..." King muttered, as he hoisted Miser up to her feet, patting her back. "...tell me something, Jillian. Where does that Callous-girl reside again?"

" *It varies,"* Jill replied, *"but wherever Metal Sonic is, she could very well be too."*

"She said she was hunting down a lone Shadow Android," Hunter remarked. "I can only assume that it's our friend, Proxy, over here." Then he regarded a nod to the android.

"...is that the case?" King muttered, before he sat down. "I know that you said that you would not aid us when it came to our warrior nation..." he began, before he looked at Jill. "...but you wouldn't have anything against us relocating closer to this building?"

" *I have nothing against that,"* Jill said, *"and I think it'll be better in the long run for everyone."* Jill let out an exhausted huff. She couldn't stay in this form anymore, and with that, she was consumed with a bright light again, only this time it wasn't as major as when she transformed.

"Brownie?" Brick said, seeing this.

After the bright light faded, Jill was her normal self, but she looked tired; so much, in fact, that she couldn't even stand anymore as she started to fall.

"Brownie!" Luckily, Brick was close enough to run and catch her before she could hit the ground.

Looking at Brick catching Jill, King hummed. "...very well. Thank you for your hospitality." Then, he got back on his feet, before looking at Sage. "If we're going to relocate, we'll need your ability, Sunrise. Could you bring Sunset and Noon with you back to the castle, so we can bring the neccessities over here?"

"...I suppose." Sage said with a nod, before she briefly glanced at Hunter. Then, as she took to the skies, Ripper and Miser were surrounded by an aura, which took them up into the sky, after the raven.

"In the meantime, I'll find a suitable place that we can settle down by around here; if I'm not mistaken; your house there is a bit crowded." King said with a shrug, as he walked past Jill, glancing down at her. "...and if Callous shows up around here, let me know immediately." he said with a low growl, before he left.

Jill didn't answer, but she watched King walk away. Then she closed her eyes, and soon enough fell asleep, which made Brick have to carry her. He brought her back to the group near HQ, looking up at them. "…Well, I never saw her *that* pissed before," he uttered.

"So that was that fairy angel form she was talking about before," Striker said, watching the group below from the top of the building.

"That was intense!" Jack said, as he was absolutely awestruck. "I've never seen anything like that at all!"

"The same would go for the rest of us..." Tails muttered, as he looked at Jill. "...we should let her rest, for now. If Callous is looking for Proxy..."

"…I'd rather not think about that," uttered Cream, as she brought all of the kids inside.

"Good grief, its just problem after problem these days," Charmy grumbled. "Seems like the old days."

"It's just not the old days; that's the problem…" Tails muttered, as he

closed his eyes. "Well, we should get inside."

Far away, in the deserted city of Metropolis, in the largest tower there, the loud noises that had emerged from the tower before had just about subsided. " *Aah... it's done.* " a robotic voice from within the tower chuckled, as its owner, Metal Sonic, observed a grey capsule he held, reminiscent of the Egg Capsules his creator had used in the past, only this one lacked a button. " *It should be safe within this.* " he said, clapping the capsule.

There was a small beep that sounded.

Incoming transmission…

" *Cal reporting. Still no sign of anything around here, but I did detect some strange occurrence of energy near the Chaotix HQ…"*

" *Hm? The Chaotix hideout?* " Metal mused, as he closed his eyes. *...it couldn't be...* he thought, before shaking his head. " *It's probably nothing we should concern ourselves with. In any case, I've sealed the black emerald within a miniature capsule, before removing the release mechanism. It is now fully sealed, so all we need now is a suitable place to hide it.* "

" *Where do you plan to hide it anyhow?"* Cal questioned. *"I don't think I could think of a place no one can get to, other than Angel Island which mysteriously disappeared all those years ago… unless…"*

" *...Angel Island...* " he uttered; he hadn't been to that island for a long time. " *...Calculate, we might have found what we've been waiting for. I need you to focus on finding any trace of that island; that is your main priority as of this moment. Search high, search low, but it must be found. Understood?* "

"… *understood,"* replied Cal, just as the transmission cut out.

" *...perfect.* " Metal chuckled, as he observed the capsule, just as he grabbed it. " *Once I've hidden this, there won't be any risks of my empire falling to pieces at the hands of outside forces. Now, I*

believe that it's time to return... "

"Is that so?" If Metal turned around, Callous would be standing right there, with folded arms; yet she was smirking.

" *...how did you get here?* " Metal asked, as he turned to face Callous. " *No... That's an idiotic question. The real question here is... what do you want here?* "

"Just checking up," Callous said. "So, you're planning to hide that black emerald, hm?"

" *...yes.* " Metal nodded, as he glanced at the capsule. " *Frankly, the risk of whatever is sealed within it breaking loose is a risk I'm unwilling to take. Unlike my creator, I know when something could blow up in my face.* " Then, as he held the capsule, liquid metal from Metal's body began covering it, as it crept up to his torso. " *And also unlike my creator, I know to uphold a sense of skepticism.* "

"Well good for you," Callous commented. "But let me ask you this; how much do you really think that emerald is important to me? I'm curious…"

" *I haven't the faintest.* " Metal shrugged, as he looked at Callous in a way that'd remind people of someone raising their eyebrow. " *But you knew about it before we met, and you knew about the Corruption within it... judging from that, I'd reckon it holds a level of importance to you. And not to be rude, but that* is *one of the key reasons I'm sealing it away.* " As he spoke, the capsule had become fully absorbed within his body, leaving no trace of it.

"I see," Callous remarked. "Well, I'd have to say you're right. However, if you had any suspicions that I was going to release my Daddy…" the girl didn't finish, as she turned around with her back to Metal, hoping to mess with him as she smirked.

" *Oh, I had some suspicions.* " Metal replied, as he actually seemed uninterested in Callous' attempt at messing with him. " *But mostly, my worries were about the usage of Corruption freeing the emerald's host... or should we call him Daddy, from now on?* " Then, he chuckled. " *In any case, I won't have my lack of knowledge*

regarding the subject matter prove to be my downfall. "

"Alright then," said Callous. "Truth be told, I didn't want him freed either. It'd mean I wouldn't have any more free time to myself anymore…but what made you want to change your mind on this, anyhow?" She turned back around to him, and she didn't have the smirk anymore. In fact, she looked at him rather suspiciously.

Again, the Metallix chuckled. " *Truth be told... I'm not so sure myself.* " Then, he walked past Callous. " *It was like something out of a dream, though... a bizarre dream.* " As he spoke, he couldn't help but continue to chuckle.

"…you mean, like a lone woman telling you what could happen if you try to use its power?" Callous supposed, without moving from where she was.

This comment made Metal actually laugh. " *Yes, something along those lines.* " he said, as he kept walking away. " *But hey, it was like a dream, so I could be mistaken.* " Even though he didn't show it on the outside, inside, he was wondering just how Callous could have guessed so accurately.

"If you say so," Callous said. "By the way, the random questions were only because I'm investigating something for myself." And that was the last of it, as Callous sank beneath the ground and into 'the dark.'

At that point, Metal stopped laughing, as he glanced back at where Callous had stood. *...whatever she's investigating, it's likely about Jillian's mother.* he thought, as he took flight, flying down the hallways. *I don't know what part a specter has to play in this... but those two are most likely going to get involved... heh. This could be interesting.*

Flamenco was grumbling to himself about the events from earlier; wondering just where in the hell the nearest town was because truthfully, he was hopelessly lost. Without a drink to keep him steadily relaxed for the next hour or so, he was going to be in a foul

mood.

As Flamenco walked, however, he'd see someone in the distance walking in his direction; though it wasn't obvious from the get-go, this was a woman, who wore very thick clothing, just about concealing any sort of features one could register on her.

Seeing this woman, Flamenco stopped with his head tilted in curiosity.

Soon, the woman got close enough to Flamenco, as she looked at him from underneath the brim of her hat. "...e-excuse me... but d-do you know where the nearest town is?" she asked shyly.

Flamenco grinned, no longer feeling grumpy. *Ah, lo que una voz melodiosa* , he thought. Then he gave the woman a brief bow. "I am sorry, Senorita, but no," he said. "I'm afraid I'm as lost as you are."

The woman blinked when she heard that. "Oh... I see..." she muttered, as she looked down at the ground. Then... she suddenly began laughing loudly. "You're lost too, huh? That's too bad! I've been out here since yesterday, and I haven't found any cities yet!" she said, in a sudden shift in tone and personality, compared to the soft-spoken woman Flamenco had been conversing with just a few seconds ago.

Flamenco was thrown off guard by the change in her personality, but nothing extreme for him, as he rubbed his head. "Uh, Si," he replied, actually embarrassed about the fact that he had admitted he was lost. "I'm not sure myself how long I've been out here, but my travels haven't been particularly…pleasant."

"Oh, is that right?" the woman laughed, when she began mellowing out. "...th-that doesn't sound good." she said in the timid voice he had heard her speak the first time. "I h-hate to dig up o-old and unpleasant memories... b-but what happened?" she asked shyly.

Flamenco raised his eyebrow at her change of behavior again, but he continued to speak. "Let's just say I ran into a *muy malo* character that put me in an unhappy mood, but nothing to worry about," he replied. "What about you?"

"M-me?" the woman uttered in a surprised tone, as she looked away from Flamenco. "...w-well..." And then suddenly, she reached forward with her left arm and grabbed Flamenco's hand, shaking it and laughing again. "Well, I was caught stealing money from a shop, and got run outta town! And now I don't know where the hell I am!" she laughed, just as a second arm on her left side scratched the back of her neck, and a third one which reached up and removed her hat, letting Flamenco see that the woman was a spider-woman. "But I'm getting ahead of myself! Name's Marylin; Lin for short!"

Naturally, most people would be freaked out by a spider, but Flamenco was more easy-going then that; still, he was relieved to know that he didn't hit on her before he knew what she looked like. "Well Lin," Flamenco started, prying his hand away once she was done shaking; she had a pretty firm grip. "I am Flamenco."

"Flamenco, huh?" Lin laughed, as she suddenly grabbed hold of Flamenco's neck with, before giving him a noogie, all without showing any of her right arms. "So you're one of those foreign types, huh? That's a plus in my..." Suddenly, she let go of Flamenco, before looking away. "...s-sorry; I tend to do that." she said timidly.

While the noggie came off as a total surprise to Flamenco, he chuckled, "No need to apologize. You were being friendly, after all, but may I ask why you act so…uniquely?" Flamenco was one to choose his words carefully when dealing with women.

"Oh..." Lin began, as she scratched the back of her head. "I... I don't really like talking about it..." she began, when she suddenly snapped her fingers, looking a lot more cheerful. "Doctors say that I'm extremely bipolar, almost to the point of me having two different personalities! Funny, ain't it?" Then, she began laughing again.

"I guess that would explain it," Flamenco said, scratching his head.

"Well, in any case..." Lin began, after she stopped laughing. "...we're both lost, so why not team up? I bet that we'll find our bearing much quicker with two heads!" As Flamenco would notice, Lin had been pretty careful in hiding her right arms, for whatever reason.

Flamenco did notice that, and after her crack about robbing a shop,

he wondered. However, he simply smiled. "That idea sounds bueno. Since I came from one direction, and you came from another, then we both can choose a direction that might lead us out of here."

"Well, I came from back there..." Lin began, as she pointed behind her with one of her arms. "...and you came from there..." Then she pointed behind Flamenco with her second arm. "...so I say we go there!" And then she pointed to the left with her third arm.

"Alright then," Flamenco said. "Senorita Lin, why not lead the way?"

"I-if you say so..." Lin responded, instantly shifting into being timid. Then, she turned to the left, when her right side accidentally bumped into Flamenco. "Oh! I-I'm sorry..." But what Flamenco would feel was that unlike her arms, her right side felt... cold.

Now Flamenco had to question it. "What is the matter with your side?" he asked. "A little chilly perhaps?"

Hearing that, Lin looked away. "...i-it's another thing I don't like to-" Before she even finished her own sentence, she suddenly placed her arms on her right side, ready to pull off the coat she wore over it. "Just promise not to freak out, you hear?" Then, she pulled the coat off.

What Flamenco would see was that unlike her left side, which had all three arms intact, the right side was a different story. Her forearms on all three were pretty much non-existant, with only a bandage on the lowest arm, a metal gauntlet on the center-most, and a chain splitting off into three ends on the upper-most, with each end of the chains having a spiked ball at the end.

Flamenco hummed as he rubbed his beak. "Interesting…" he muttered.

"More morbid than interesting, really." Lin shrugged, as she placed one hand on her metal gauntlet. "I got in an accident years ago, and... well, let's just say that I'm lucky to be alive." Then, she laughed. "Oh, well, not that big a loss! I mean, I got a freaking triple-flail for an arm now!" she said, lifting the chain-arm to prove her point. "Isn't that cool?"

"An accident, hm?" Flamenco commented. *Well, I must admit that I've met stranger women,* he thought. "Well, you won't have to worry about disturbing me; I'll be just fine. Now, let's get going, shall we?"

"Yes! Let's get moving!" Lin laughed, as she ran ahead for a bit, before she slowed down. "J-just don't fall too f-far behind, okay?"

"I won't," Flamenco replied, as he started walking himself.

Meanwhile, Jill was experiencing yet another dream of hers…

The moment I emerged from that fog again, I wasn't walking…

… somehow, I was flying. The fog, turned out to be the sea of clouds in the sky, and I rose out of it into the big blue. I was voyaging across the sea of clouds calmly and peacefully, but somehow, I still felt like something was wrong.

I happened to glance beside me, and a certain red echidna was flying beside me. "Knuckles?!" I uttered.

He just looked at me, before he spoke. "Jill, I need you find Angel Island," he said.

" *What?" I didn't quite understand what he was asking me.*

Knuckles studied my look for a minute. "…has Tails even told you what happened to it?" he asked me, raising an eyebrow.

" *Well, not really…" I replied. "He talked about it, yes, but he never said anything about something happening to it…"*

" *Hm," Knuckles then looked forward, and stopped in the middle of the air. Then he pointed. "Look over there."*

Once I stopped beside him, I turned to look. A monstrous mass of clouds were gathered together, and flickers of lightning could be seen within the clouds. It looked like an enormous storm.

" *That is Angel Island now," Knuckles said, which caused me to*

shoot him a shocked look.

" *What happened to it?!" I asked him.*

Knuckles turned to me. "Ask Tails; he'll tell you," he said. "But whatever you're looking for, you'll find it there."

" *But…but what if we try to get through that storm?!" I asked. "Any plane the Professor might build could be decimated in there!"*

Knuckles smiled. "Trust me, Tails is the best pilot I know. He wouldn't let a single bolt strike him yet…but listen, don't just jump up and demand to see Angel Island; you'll sound like some sort of freak."

I couldn't help but chuckle, "Alright…"

Jill woke up then, getting right out of bed and walking into the hall. As she walked through the hall, she eventually came across Natal, who seemed just about ready to go to bed. "...hi." she said to Jill with a brief nod.

"Oh, hi Natal," Jill said. Then realizing that she was going to bed, she scratched her head sheepishly. "What time is it anyway?" she asked.

"...half past midnight." Natal said drowsily, as she yawned. "What's up?" she then asked.

"Oh…" Jill felt even more embarrassed. "…nothing, just curious. I don't think I'll be going back to sleep for awhile, but I won't bug you anymore." And with that, she walked past Natal. "Good night Natal."

Giving Jill a nod, it looked like Natal was going into her room, but when Jill turned a corner, the bullfrog glanced back at where she had gone. Raising an eyebrow, Natal decided to follow Jill, though she did so discreetly, to not cause the ewe to notice her.

Eventually, Jill entered the living room, where Tails sat by himself with a cup of tea. Noticing the ewe, Tails smiled. "Fancy seeing you up so late, Jill." he said, as he placed the cup on a table.

"Hi Professor," Jill said, smiling back. "Hey…uh, about earlier today…I didn't mean to get that angry," she chuckled nervously.

"Don't worry about it." Tails said. "In the end, nobody got seriously injured, so there's no reason to dwell on it." Then, he glanced at the cup of tea. "Say, would you like some tea, Jill?"

"No thanks," Jill replied. "I never really was a fan of tea…but thanks for offering." She glanced around the room a moment, before her eyes fell back on Tails. "Is everyone else asleep?" she asked.

"Just about." Tails said, as he glanced out the window. "Wiper decided that he could help King's group in setting up a place for them to sleep outside, so he's still out there. Everyone else went to bed some time ago; Natal was the last to go."

"Yeah, I passed by her," Jill remarked, taking a seat near Tails. "Well, I won't be going back to sleep for awhile…so I figured I'd stay up and just hang out." Then she started to feel uneasy. *Angel Island…* she thought, remembering those terrible stormy clouds. With all the stories Tails had told all of them…he neglected to tell them things that happened after their adventures. He never even said what happened to everyone.

Seeing Angel Island as a forsaken haven, it made Jill wonder just what happened. She was uneasy because part of her had a feeling that if she asked, she could be digging up unhappy memories in the old fox.

"Is something on your mind, Jill?" Tails asked, as he took a sip of his tea. "It does look like it..."

Jill hesitated to answer. "Professor…" she said, looking up at him. "…what happened to Angel Island?"

Thankfully, Tails had placed the tea on the table before she asked that, as she could instantly see that the very mention of the name affected him. "...to put it bluntly... it vanished." he muttered.

Jill's brows arched. She felt so guilty asking, as well as asking, "…do you know how it vanished?"

"...the Master Emerald played a key part in that." Tails muttered, as he closed his eyes. "After Knuckles died, he left no one to claim his role as guardian of the emerald. I'm not sure if he did it, or if the Master Emerald did it on its own, but it..." Just thinking about it seemed to make him shudder. "...it was like watching a black hole consume the entire island from within..."

"…I'm sorry for asking about it," Jill said. "It's just…"

"No, don't worry about it." Tails said, as he forced himself to smile at her. "I've never talked about Angel Island after the time Eggman's regime came to an end, so some of you must have been curious."

Jill studied Tails to make sure, but she peered down at the ground. "…I had another dream," she said, "and the reason I was asking was because…I was asked to find it." There, she said it. She secretly wondered if this violated what Knuckles suggested.

This made Tails lose his smile, as he eyed Jill curiously. "...you were asked to..." he began. "...by who, Jill?"

"…by Knuckles," Jill replied, looking back up at him again. "He said whatever I was looking for, I'd find there."

"...did he, now..." Tails muttered, as he closed his eyes again. "...I haven't seen Angel Island in many years, so if it's still around, I'm not sure if I can locate it."

"…I'm not sure if I could either," Jill admitted. *What I'm looking for,* she thought. *…could my mother be there?* The only thing Jill ever wanted to find were answers; especially since recent events had brought up so many more questions. She can't exactly call up Sonic and his friends and ask them; it just didn't work like that.

So she wondered if her own mother could answer her questions.

"…but we probably don't have to worry about it right now," Jill uttered. "I mean…no one's really going anywhere in the middle of the night…" Tails probably knew that, but Jill felt like she had to say so to convince herself that.

"...yes..." Tails muttered, as he looked at Jill. "...I suppose you're

right."

"Do you?" The new voice led Tails to glance at the doorway Jill had entered through, to see Natal standing there, one hand on her hip. "What about Metal?"

"…what about him?" Jill asked.

Groaning, Natal pressed her fingers against her forehead, before looking at Jill with a 'duh' kind of look. "It's *Metal Sonic.* Who knows what he could think of doing? For all we know, while we're trying to rest up, he could be collecting the rest of the Chaos Emeralds... and happen upon Angel Island?"

Tails looked at Natal with a surprised look, though not for obvious reasons. *...is that the first time she's said a sentence longer than three words?* he thought.

Jill was amazed at the length of the sentence herself, but the point was clearly expressed. "We only have one emerald," Jill said, starting to count on her fingers, "…King and his group have one themselves, but judging how fast Shadow gathered the emeralds before, along with the fact that Metal could collect them just as fast with others working with him…"

Thinking about it, she sighed in disdain. "You're right…but how are we going to find the rest faster than him?"

After Jill asked that, Natal glanced outside. "...maybe they could help?"

"You mean King's group?" Tails asked, as he raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that they'd help us out?"

"Well, we *are* letting them stay here." Natal said with a shrug. "Seems pretty fair that they help us out, right?"

Jill thought about it. King did say that he'd be willing to lend a hand, but she wondered if he'd go on again about convincing them to join his "nation," as he called it. She didn't want to deal with that. "Maybe we can wait until the mor—!!!"

Just then, Jill stopped. Her eyes widened suddenly, and she immediately rose to her feet.

This made both Tails and Natal look at Jill curiously. "...what's wrong, Jill?" Tails asked, as he stood up as well.

"Is it Callous?" Natal asked, as she glanced out the window. "Or is it someone else...?"

Jill didn't answer right away, and for a minute, it was silent. Then Jill's eyes suddenly became fully green and alien-like. "It's Callous," she growled, and without another word, Jill dashed right out of the room, down the hall, and towards the door to outside.

"Jill!" Tails called, as he prepared to follow her, just as Natal took hold of his shoulder. "Natal...?"

"We can't fight her." Natal said, as she shook her head. "We'll have to leave this one to Jill..."

Once Jill was outside, she didn't even bother to stop. She found herself rushing through the woods near the HQ, and sooner or later, her eyes caught a shadowy figure hurrying through the trees. "There you are…" she muttered, trying her best to follow it,

After a long wild goose chase, the shadowy figure led Jill into the middle of a clearing, with the moon shining down on the field. Looking around, Jill didn't see the figure, but she could still sense its presence.

Then she had a sudden urge to whip out her sword and turn right around.

The instant she did that, her blade met with another's; one that belonged to a particular scythe. Jill found herself glaring into a pair of red eyes that were just as alien as hers.

"Hello, little sis," Callous chuckled. "It's about time that we met again."

Jill pushed Callous away, as the two stood on opposite sides of the clearing. "What do you want, Callous?!"

Meanwhile, not too far off from the two girls…

"Oi, there has to be an ending to these woods…" groaned Flamenco.

"I-I hope so, too..." Lin muttered timidly, as she glanced around the woods. "I j-just hope that we d-don't encounter any bad people..."

As the two girls stared each other down, they would hear something trudging through the woods, headed right their way.

"Great, the first time we meet in a long time, and we get interrupted," Callous muttered. "How rude." Though suddenly, Jill came right at Callous with her blade just as she deflected it with her scythe.

"You know what's more rude then that?!" Jill asked. "Neglecting to answer my question! What the HELL do you want?!"

Callous smirked, "Oh my. I don't think I've heard you with that kind of language before. Maybe Brick-head is a bad influence on you."

Flamenco heard the sound of clashing metal as he walked, and a distant conversation between two female voices. "Lin, do you hear that?" he asked the spider.

"Yeah, I did!" Lin said, as she suddenly grabbed Flamenco, holding his beak with one hand, and shushing him with the other two. "Maybe there's a fight going on! Let's go check it out!" Then, she tip-toed towards the source of the noise, carrying Flamenco with her.

"So, you're Callous." Soon, right from out of the woods, a figure Jill and Callous would likely recognize stepped out; King. "Allow me to introduce myself; the name is Twilight."

"Twilight eh?" Callous remarked.

"King!" Jill had to admit she was surprised that he showed up.

"King? Geez, make up your mind about your name," Callous said. Then she back flipped away from Jill trying to swipe at her with her sword. "Good god, little sis, can't you just chill?"

After Jill rested from trying to attack Callous, she answered, "Callous, I know what you did to me when I sealed Deity away. What makes you think I'd turn my back on you the second time?!"

"Oh, you regained your memory?" Callous asked curiously.

Chapter 24

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lin and Flamenco would finally get close enough to see what was going on, and with the set up of two girls and a guy, Flamenco instantly thought; *Hm, perhaps two chicas fighting over him?*

However, Lin was more focused on one thing... *Hey, does that girl have a scythe? That's not good as a weapon...*

However, as Callous asked Jill this question, King suddenly rushed at her, his fists crackling with electricity. "How about you take on a *real* man?!" he yelled, as he threw his fists forward, intending to strike Callous.

Callous moved her head to keep from King punching her with an electric fist. "How, yes, dare I say it, shocking," she said. Figuring that a scythe wouldn't be the best choice against thunder cat here, she dismissed it as she brought out her two whips. Then she attempted to whip King across the face.

Flamenco blinked. *Pues, that numbers out what I was thinking after all…* he thought.

However, King was surprisingly agile for someone his size, easily maneuvering past the whips. "You're gonna have to lash more cattle before you can hit me, Callous!" Then, with a roar, he punched the thin air, though a pressurized blast of electricity shot out of his fist, aimed right at Callous.

And she jumped right out of the way, just in time for the electric blast to head straight for Flamenco and Lin.

"ESQUIVAR!" Flamenco called out, grabbing Lin and leaping out of its way. They were saved, but this resulted in giving themselves away.

"Wha? Who're you guys?!" Jill questioned.

"M-Marylin!" Lin yelled in fright, as she cowered behind Flamenco. "We're sorry! W-we won't disturb you anymore!"

"Don't think I'm done with you, yet!" King yelled after Callous, as he kept firing blasts of electricity at her, and one could clearly see that he had a pissed-off look on his face.

"Aw, are you getting mad?" teased Callous, continuing to evade his blasts of electricity.

Flamenco just watched them battle with interest; especially Callous…

It got to a point where Callous jumped through into the ground out of sight a moment, and then she popped up right behind King, intending to jab her hand into his back; coated with Corruption energy, nonetheless.

However, just before her hand would have made contact with King, he suddenly grabbed hold of her wrist, halting the attack without even looking at her. "Why shouldn't I be mad? You manipulated my comrade!" he said, before he spun around, intending to deliver an electrically-charged fist right in Callous' face.

Callous ducked her head, letting the fist fly over just in time to kick him, freeing her. "Well, unfortunately I don't have time for you, Twilight," she said. "I came here to talk with my little sister for a moment."

"Stop calling me your little sister," Jill growled. "You know that's not really true!"

Flamenco just raised an eyebrow; *and I thought Lin was loco…* he thought.

"So if you'll excuse me," Callous said, before popping into the ground and back out, grabbing Jill from behind. "I'm just going to take us to a more relaxing place!"

Jill's eyes widened again, but this time, in fear. "No…" she uttered, "…not the dark!!!"

Callous smirked. "Yes, the dark!" And with that, before King could even try to stop her, she dove into the ground with Jill screaming, before she was silenced.

And they were gone.

"What in the--?!" Flamenco blurted, when he saw that.

"Th-they just vanished!" Lin uttered in fright, before she stood up. "Alright, where did the not-nice chick take the nice chick?!"

Growling, King glanced around the area. "CALLOUS!" he roared, as he suddenly punched the area where Callous had vanished with an electric fist, shattering the ground. "Come out and face me, you... filthy sleeper!!!"

"Oh my. He's got some language." Lin noted.

Flamenco shook his head. "I am thinking, Senor, that you may not find them. I do not know what kind of powers that chica had, but they are otherworldly by the looks of it," he said to King.

Growling, King glared at Flamenco. "Can it!" he said, as he began approaching the toucan. "That bitch just took away Jillian! You expect me to sit idly by and let her have her way with the poor girl?!"

Before things could escalate, however, Lin stepped in between Flamenco and King. "Hey, we can focus on fighting each other *after* we find out what those two chicks are doing!"

"This, eh, Jillian," Flamenco said. "Is she important to you?"

Growling, King turned away from Flamenco and Lin. "...I don't know her personally." he said, as he glanced at the two. "But she has some powers that neither of you could bear to comprehend. She would make an excellent ally against foes like Metal Sonic and..." As he spoke, he clenched his hands into fists, sparks zapping out of his knuckles.

"Senor, perhaps I don't know the urgency of the situation, but relax if you will," Flamenco said. "If this Jillian has the said powers, then maybe she isn't in as much trouble as you think."

"..." Scoffing, King merely sat down, his arms folded. "...she'd better be alright."

"But then again..." Lin began, as she rubbed her cheek. "...she didn't seem too thrilled to enter... th-the dark..."

Considering those words, Flamenco turned to King. "Is there anyone she knows that we can alert about this?" he suggested. "That is, if you're *that* concerned about the chica…"

"...yeah!" Then, King suddenly sprang back on his feet, before looking out of the forest. "The HQ! We've got to give the word over there!" Then, he quickly rushed through the woods.

"Wow, he's fast!" Lin noted, before she grabbed Flamenco. "C'mon, let's see what her friends are like!" Then, she bolted after King.

"Whao!" Flamenco was certainly taken by surprise when Lin dragged him along. *Just as long as we get out of these woods,* he thought to some relief.

The first one King would probably run into would be Hunter, who was sitting by himself when he spotted King. "What happened?" he asked. "…and why do you look so disturbed?"

"Senor, I believe there was a battle between two chicas, and one took the other away," Flamenco replied, which confused Hunter.

"…huh?" he asked flatly.

"He said that there was this one chick that fought the other chick and then the tiger fought the other chick and then the other chick took the one chick away!" Lin said, grinning after she was done.

Groaning, King suddenly grabbed Hunter's shoulders. "Listen, we've got no time to lose! Callous *took Jill!* "

"WHAT?!" Hunter bellowed, becoming angry already. Understanding the situation perfectly now, he took off. "King, you go tell Wiper and the rest, while I head to HQ and tell her friends!"

"Godspeed, comrade!" King said, as he quickly turned tail, rushing

towards where the rest of the GUN squad leaders would be.

"Everyone's going off so quickly..." Lin muttered, as she glanced down at Flamenco. "D-do you think we s-should help?"

Flamenco looked at Lin until he yawned. "If you wish to help them, then I will be willing to lend my sword as well. I would like to find a place to stay for the night anyhow, and if we help these folks, they could possibly pay us at least that much." With that, Flamenco headed off in the direction that King went. "Lin, you go ahead and follow that wolf character!" he called back.

"'kay!" Lin said, as she was quick to run after Hunter.

In the meantime, King reached the camp where the other members of his troupe were, sitting around a campfire. Looking over at King, Sage immediately got a shocked look. "...you're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was, Sunrise..." King muttered, as he clenched his fists. "Listen, comrades! We need to start searching for Jillian this instant!"

Hearing that, Wiper got on his feet, looking crossly at King. "What are you saying, Twilight?" he said with a hiss.

"What I'm saying is that..." King began, as he growled. "...Callous took Jill."

Immediately, everyone, save for Ripper, was looking at King in a shocked way. "...she did *what?!* " Wiper yelled.

"Listen, we can't stand around here for too long! Everyone, start looking for them!" With that, everyone but Sage and Ripper immediately dispersed, as Sage glanced at Ripper.

"...you alright, Noon?" she asked, though the mantis seemed to be peachy.

"Kekekekeke... I feel excellent, Sunrise." he chuckled, as he looked at his scythe-blades. "You go and look. I'll be right there."

"Any way I can be of assistance?" Flamenco asked, appearing to

the two.

Glancing at the toucan, Sage shrugged. "The best you can do is to start combing the area, like the others are doing." Then, she turned to Ripper. "Listen, I'll fly up and see if I can't locate Jill's brainwaves. After the session we had earlier, I can try and scope her out mentally." Then, she took to the sky, leaving Ripper and Flamenco by themselves.

"...kekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he continued admiring his scythe-blades. "...it feels... painful... but exhilerating... kekekekeke..."

Flamenco raised his eye brow at Ripper. "Alright, I take it back," he said. "You are the most loco out of everyone I've met so far…"

Hunter didn't even bother knocking, barging in through the front door. "EVERYONE WAKE UP!" he screamed.

His scream was more than enough to not only scare the wits out of both Tails and Natal, but also wake up several other people within the house, including Newt, who stepped out of his room with a drowsy look. "Ungh... what's goin' on?"

"A hell'va lot!" Hunter practically yelled in his face. "Jillian was just kidnapped by Callous!!!"

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?!" bellowed Brick, who burst out of his door wide awake the moment he heard that.

"King and the others are already looking for her!" Hunter remarked.

"If that's the case..." Natal muttered, as she threw Newt a glance. "...then we should look for her. Right now!"

"Y-yeah!" Newt chimed in, as he quickly hurried back into his room, before running out, carrying his Stinger and Natal's nodachi. "Let's get a move on, and quick!"

"Hunter! Where did you see them last?!" Brick demanded.

"I don't know, ask King; he was there when it happened!" Hunter said. "But just get out there and look!" Then he started rushing through the halls, hoping to wake up the kids and get Boomer to activate the robots.

Just as Brick headed outside, he ran into Lin. "Uh…can I help you?" he asked.

"No, but I can help you!" Lin said cheerfully, giving Brick a triple thumbs-up. "I saw that dark chick take away the not-dark chick, and..." Then, she suddenly went timid again. "...I-I don't know where she t-took her... but she s-suddenly disappeared into the g-ground... into d-darkness..."

"Into darkness?" Brick asked, puzzled. "…wait, you were there!?" Without warning, Brick snatched one of Lin's left hands and pulled her towards the woods. "C'mon!"

Meanwhile, Hunter had gotten Boomer up and she was activating Whisker. "Whisker, we have a red alert!" she said. "Jillian has been kidnapped by Callous!"

"Wha- She has?!" Whisker uttered the moment he was activated, before he got to his feet, slamming his fists together. "Then we ortin' ta get movin'! Avast, ye swabber-brains!"

"Hurry then!" Boomer said. "Everyone else is already heading out!" And Boomer wasn't quite sure where Proxy and Omega are, since she wasn't in charge of them, but she grabbed her Gatling gun before she headed out her own bedroom door.

"Mr. Hunter!" Milo said. "Wait for us!"

"No you guys," Hunter said to the kids. "Callous is WAY too dangerous. We need you guys to stay here in case Jill somehow makes it back here on her own. You'll have Cream, Charmy, and the Professor."

"But Hunter," Ani protested, "Jill's our friend!"

Hunter looked at Ani. "I'm sorry," he said. "But we don't want to lose you guys out there too…"

As most of the people were rushing out of the HQ to locate Jill, in the shadows, a lone person stood... or rather, a lone android. *So Jill's been kidnapped...* he thought, as he glanced at his hand, letting a dark glow briefly envelope it. *...if I have that energy... maybe I can locate her?* Nodding, Proxy closed his eyes, and began focusing. *Where are you... Callous?*

Meanwhile...

Jill felt delirious, but she knew where she was, and because of that, she was really afraid. Someone like her can't enter or leave 'the dark' by will like Callous, or even Deity, could, and in a place like this, Jill was the most vulnerable.

"Oh relax," Callous said, which Jill could tell was right next to her. "You know as well as I do that if something serious happened to you, I'd be in a tight spot too. That's why I'll never kill you."

"Still, it doesn't mean you can't torment me," Jill replied. "After all, you feel the opposite of what I do."

"So you still remember that, huh?" Callous chuckled. "Seriously, I came to ask questions, but since you're here, I could probably push you around if I wanted to." Callous walked around Jill tauntingly, even when she couldn't be seen in 'the dark,' and she continued to chuckle.

Jill shuddered. "Look, just ask your questions!"

"Hey, hey, no need to rush things," Callous said. Suddenly, Jill felt her hair being pulled up and she winced, just as she came face-to-face with Callous. "I just think we need to catch up a little!"

"What could I possibly tell you that you don't already know, Callous?" Jill asked in aggravation.

"Good point," Callous said, smirking. "Congratulations on getting laid, by the way."

"What?!?!"

"Now, moving on." Callous released Jill's hair, dropping her.

"Ow..." Jill uttered.

"I'll go ahead and get to the point," Callous said. "Just how exactly did you get your powers back?"

"Gee, I thought you knew that," Jill retorted with sharp sarcasm, which got her a good punch to the face.

"I wouldn't take that tone with me if I were you," Callous said. "Yes, I have an idea, since I've been seeing your ghostly friends once or twice snooping around when they shouldn't, but...there's something blocking my connection with you."

Jill wiped her bleeding nose; healing was prevented as well when she was in the presence of 'the dark' so she had to be cautious. However, what Callous said intrigued Jill. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"If you remember, I could tell what you were thinking, read your emotions and actions, and I had the ability to manipulate that," Callous replied. "But recently, there's something about you that's shielding me from doing that; even in 'the dark,' and it definitely wasn't there before."

"Frankly, Callous, most of what's happening to me is a surprise to me too," Jill said.

"Then how come Mom's involved?"

Jill was stunned. She never heard Callous speak like that. "Did you just...?"

"Yeah, I called her Mom," Callous said. "But does it really matter? Technically, she's both our Mom you know, with me bearing just a tiny bit of your essence and all..."

"BROWNIE!!!" Brick screamed, running as fast as he could. He was also running rather blindly, and when the bull least expected it, he ran right into a tree branch. Sitting up from the ground, he clutched his nose, and screamed, "SON OF A BITCH!!!"

"H-hey, don't strain yourself!" Lin called, as she followed Brick, helping him get on his feet. "W-we can't find her if you keep running i-into things!"

"I'm afraid that finding her is going to take a lot more than just looking after her." Soon, Proxy stepped out of the woods, looking at Brick with a serious look.

"Why is that?" Brick questioned, looking at Proxy while he rubbed his nose.

"To put it simply," Proxy began, as he closed his eyes, "she's not here. She's in a different place, which only Callous seems to know how to access, likely due to her powers over Corruption."

"Corruption?" Lin asked, as she looked curiously at the android. "What's that?"

"Right now, that doesn't matter." Proxy said, as he closed his eyes. "In any case, I've tried seeing if I couldn't enter said realm, but so far, I haven't had any success. Though if I were successful, we could likely take Jill away from Callous before anything could happen to her."

"Then...then try harder!" Brick yelled. One could already tell tears were in his eyes. "I don't know what the hell she's doing to Brownie, but you've got to try harder!"

"...I'll try." Proxy nodded, as he closed his eyes, before he placed his hands on the ground. "I can't promise anything... but I will try." Then, dark energy began amassing around his hands, spreading around him, though it kept away from both Brick and Lin. "Don't stand too close; I'm not sure if the Corruption will affect you in some way." he said, as he gritted his teeth. *Come on... lead me to Callous!* he thought.

Brick took Lin and pulled her away from Proxy, hoping that he'd be able to do it.

From the looks of it, Proxy was beginning to feel the strain of the Corruption, as his arms were trembling. *Come on... just a bit more...*

he thought, as the darkness around him got even darker.

"...d-do you think h-he'll pull through?" Lin asked, as she glanced away from Proxy.

At that point, however, Proxy's arms suddenly sank into the ground, and he suddenly opened his eyes. "I... I did it!" he said, as he pushed himself further into the darkness. "You two, stay here and make sure that the darkness doesn't fade; this could be the only way out of there!" Then, he suddenly sank completely into the dark.

"C'mon Proxy..." Brick muttered uneasily. "...find her quickly..."

Jill had been slapped around for quite sometime, and boy was the pain setting in. Producing one more slap across her face, Callous finally calmed. "Ah," she chuckled. "That feels so much better. Seems like old times, doesn't it?"

Jill didn't say anything.

"So, you deny any knowing of what's going on?" Callous asked her.

Jill tried her hardest to lift her head. "Yes Callous, I don't know what's going on," she said. "I was hoping that Mom knew what was going on...I'm sure if you ask her what's going on, she'll tell you, likely."

Hearing that, Callous' smirk fell. Noticing this, Jill asked. "What's the matter? You're not *afraid* of Mom are you?" That got her a kick to her face, knocking her onto her back.

"Shut your mouth!" Callous yelled, apparently losing her cool.

The heel of her stilettos managed to cut across her face, and Jill wouldn't be able to take any more hits, or she could very well be done for.

"Were you planning to ask her some questions yourself?" Callous asked Jill, taking the girl by the hair again.

"None of your business Callous," Jill replied. That instant, Callous gave Jill another punch to the face, knocking the girl onto the ground. She cringed, trying to keep from crying.

"Well, if you're not going to tell me about Mom, maybe you could tell me about a certain android that got away from us," Callous said. "I'd like to know if you saw him..."

"She did. In fact, he's right here."

At that moment, Callous was suddenly decked by a fist coated in darkness, as a familiar figure stood between Jill and Callous. "Looking for me, delinquent?" Proxy said mockingly, as he raised his fist in defiance.

"Well what do you know?" Callous said, getting back up after a punch like that. "You figured out some of the benefits of Corruption."

"P...Prox-xy?" Jill uttered, trying to sit up herself.

"Well, it didn't take too long; just needed to focus on the subject at hand." Proxy said, before he glanced back at Jill. "Don't worry, Jill." he said reassuringly, as he cracked his neck, before looking back at Callous. "I'll see to it that you get out of here."

"Since you're here, I'd like to know, *Proxy,"* Callous sneering on his nickname. "Why are you siding with them? You were originally programmed to attack and kill Jill, but it seems like you've got a free will of your own. I also know Corruption is not the sole reason that happened..."

"...I suppose I just feel like siding with them." Proxy shrugged, as he clenched his fists, glaring at Callous. "I don't know how, but I do feel that your side is not the right one. So, let's dance, Callous."

Callous just looked at him. "...actually, on second thought, I'll pass," she said finally. "In fact, you can take her back now. I'm done with all the questioning."

"....what?" Jill said in disbelief. "After all that....you're just going to let me go?"

"...what makes you think that I'll let you go?" Proxy said, as he clenched his fists, before he smirked. "Or... is it that you're afraid? Afraid that someone might actually harm you? Or worse..." Then, he began walking towards Callous, a dark aura enveloping his arms. "...defeat you?"

"No, I'm not afraid," Callous said. "But I don't think she'll last much longer here." Pointing at Jill, Proxy could tell that she looked somewhat ill. "Now, if you want to fight me and let her condition get worse, that's fine," she said. "But am I really worth her life?"

Jill was just trying not to lose consciousness now, but the darkness was having quite an effect on her.

Looking back at Jill, Proxy gritted his teeth, before glaring back at Callous. "...no. No, you're not worth it." he muttered, before closing his eyes. "...but whether you choose to admit it or not... I know. You ARE afraid, Callous." Then, he uttered that strange language that only Callous would understand. *"At least you should be; Jill's under my protection again."* Then, he warped next to Jill, before both of them warped out of sight.

Callous was left speechless once Proxy and Jill were gone. "Under his protection again?" she muttered. Then it came to her. "....Shadow, you snide little bastard," she grumbled, as she walked away. "All this time, you were right under my nose..."

Back on the surface, Brick was watching where Proxy had gone silently and expectantly, waiting to see if he would come back with Jill.

All of a sudden, a hand shot out from the darkness, which startled Lin quite a bit.

"Holy cow!" she said, as she quickly grabbed the hand with two of her own hands, taking care not to touch the darkness. "That's him, alright! Reelin' in!" Then, she began pulling up the hand's owner; namely Proxy, who held Jill over his shoulder.

The minute he saw them for sure, Brick was quick to rush over and help pull out Proxy. Once he was completely out, he took Jill from him. "I owe you one Proxy," Brick said to the android.

"Don't mention it." Proxy muttered, as he glanced at his hands. Everything seems fine... it looks like my knowledge of Chaos Control lets me use Corruption with this body... he thought.

"Hey, is something on your mind?" Lin asked, as she noted the look Proxy had on his face.

"...never mind." Proxy muttered, as he looked at Brick. "For now, let's get Jill back to the HQ; being in there took its toll on her." As he spoke, the dark portal closed itself.

"Yeah, it feels like she's beginning to run a fever," Brick remarked, feeling her forehead. Then he looked back at the android. "Proxy, since you can use Chaos Control, you should go find everyone and tell them you found her, and to head back to HQ. Me and...uh, spider-woman will take her back."

"Hey, my name is Marylin! But it's Lin for short!" Lin protested, as she helped Brick carry Jill.

"Right... I'll see if I can't find the others." Proxy nodded, as he suddenly vanished.

"Lin? Well, thanks for your help," Brick said. "C'mon, I'll lead the way..."

Back at HQ...

"I really hope Jill's okay," Ani said, pacing back and forth nervously in the room.

"I can't believe that Callous person!" griped Striker. "Jill never did anything wrong to anyone! Why does she want to hurt her?!"

"Yeah, Callous is such a big poopy-head!" Jack said with a pout, as he folded his arms. "I mean, thanks to her, Jill's-"

"Back." At that moment, Proxy suddenly warped right in between the

kids, glancing at them.

"...wait, who's back?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head.

"I believe both you and I answered that." Proxy mused, as he looked at the kids. "Brick and some spider-girl are bringing Jill back here. Just thought that I'd let you know." Then, he suddenly vanished again.

"Jill's okay!?" Ani blurted. Before anyone could stop her, she ran down the halls to get to the door to outside. The kids likely followed her eagerly, and once she pushed the door open, they could see a couple figures heading toward the HQ.

Striker squinted his eyes. "...Brick?!"

"Guys!" Brick called out, "she's alright!"

"Y-yeah!" Lin chimed in, as she glanced down at Jill. "B-but she's going to need a check-up, quick!"

"Really?!" Jack uttered, before he suddenly ran into the HQ. "Come on, guys; we have to get Professor Tails and Grandma Cream!"

"You're serious?!" At this point, Proxy had managed to locate both of the search squads, and had told them that Jill was safe. "She's really okay?!" King exclaimed out of shock.

"Yes, she is." Proxy said, as he glanced at the HQ. "She's going to need medical attention, I think... but she'll pull through."

"Phew... thank heavens." Sage muttered, as she wiped her brow. "For a minute there, I was really worried."

"Proxy, where did you find her?" Hunter asked. "HOW did you find her?"

"Let's just say that she was in a very dark place." Proxy said, as he glanced at Hunter. "In any case, Brick and some spider-girl are bringing her back to the HQ."

Then, King suddenly grabbed hold of Proxy's hand, shaking it. "I can't tell you how grateful I am for you helping her out! For a moment... I thought-"

"Spare the cheers, Twilight." Wiper said, as he separated King and Proxy, before hissing. "If Jill's back at the HQ, we have no further reason to wander aimlessly in the woods. Let's head back."

"Yeah, let's..." Sage began, when she noticed something, before glancing at Miser. "...where's Ripper?"

"Eh?" Miser uttered, as she looked around. "...strange. He's not here... do you think he's still back at the camp?"

Boomer just looked at them in disbelief. "You guys should be in charge of keeping an eye on your maniacs!" she said, throwing her hands in the air. "Where could he possibly run off to anyway?!"

Hunter smacked his forehead. "You don't have to worry about that Boomer, just head back. We'll take care of it."

"Yeah... come on, Boomer, we gotta go, y'know!" Newt said, as he watched Natal, Omega and Whisker head back towards the HQ, before glancing at the duck.

"Wiper, you go with them there as well." King said, before he looked at the rest of the unit. "We'll see where Ripper has run off to."

Boomer looked at them before she finally ran after Newt and the others.

"Yeah, just make sure Jillian gets treated," Hunter added.

"She will be." Proxy nodded, as he and Wiper followed the others back to HQ.

"Alright..." King muttered, as he looked around. "Ripper! Come out, now; show's over!"

"Kekekeke... is it?" That shrill laughter sent a few chills down Miser's spine, as the group glanced at the woods, where they could see the mantis emerge from, though he seemed a bit sluggish, as if he had

been drugged. "Too bad... I wanted to see some blood tonight... kekekekeke..."

"Ripper, what were you up to?" Hunter asked, folding his arms.

"Oh, nothing... kekekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he tilted his head. "So... what are we going to do now, King?"

"...Ripper, are you sure that you're alright?" King asked.

"Of course... kekekekekeke..." Ripper replied. "Why would I not be alright? Kekekekekekeke..." As Ripper chuckled as if nothing was up, Sage

glanced at him with a thoughtful look.

Hunter noticed Sage's look. "What did you get from him Sage?"

"..." However, Sage didn't answer.

"Well, if everyone's here..." King muttered, before pointing towards where their camp was. "We'll head back for the time being. If Jill needs rest, she mustn't be disturbed!" Then, he, Miser and Ripper went ahead, leaving Sage and Hunter behind.

"...I think that pesky Callous managed to influence Ripper a bit too much when they met back at the volcano." Sage whispered to Hunter. "We should keep an eye on him; remember, he's even more unstable than Miser is."

"What do you mean by that Sage?" Hunter whispered back.

"I'm not sure how to explain it logically..." Sage began, as she glanced at Hunter. "...but when I read Ripper's mind, I picked up more than one brainwave... in fact, I picked up five." Then, she looked back at where the others had gone. "And if I'm not mistaken... the additional four came from his blades."

"...great, just what we need," groaned Hunter. "A schizophrenic Ripper...yeah, I'll keep an eye on him." Then he started walking. "Anyhow, lets get back before they get suspicious."

Chapter 25

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Luckily, it's just an ordinary fever," Cream said, shutting the door to the room behind her as she walked into the hall where everyone was waiting. "She should be better in a day or so."

"You mean, she'll be sick for a whole day?!" Ani questioned in disbelief.

"I'm sure everything will be fine Ani," Boomer said. "Be glad that Jill didn't get too seriously injured."

"You know, for someone who can heal, they get hurt an awful lot," Rudy remarked.

Boomer shot him a glare. "Can it Rudy," she said.

"Yes, well, all she'll need, like anyone else who's sick, is just plenty of rest," Cream continued. "So I advise everyone not to bother her."

"Okay, Grandma Cream..." Jack nodded, as he glanced at Proxy, who was leaning against the wall. "And... thanks a lot, Proxy!"

"Don't mention it. You've only thanked me about 25 times now." Proxy said with a shrug.

"But you did get Jill out of there." Wiper noted, as he folded his arms. "If you hadn't-"

"Look, I got her out; simple as that. No sense thinking about what could have happened." Proxy said.

"Well, now that everything FINALLY settled down," Boomer said. "I couldn't help but check the radar while Cream was taking care of Jill, and I happened to find an emerald."

"Really?" Charmy said. "That's great Boomer. Where did the radar locate it?"

"For some reason, it's located in a little village on a mountain," Boomer said. "Mt. Solitude to be exact."

The room fell silent.

"What?" Boomer asked.

"Boomer," Brick said. "Are you absolutely sure that's where the emerald is?"

"Sure I'm sure," Boomer said. "Why the heck are you acting so weird all of a sudden?"

"Because…" Brick said. "…that's Brownie's village."

"Jill's home?" Wiper inquired, as he glanced at Brick. "What a coincidence... Newt, Natal, let's go." With a nod, he turned to leave, as both Newt and Natal glanced curiously at him.

"...what?" Natal asked, as she looked dumbfounded at Wiper.

"We can't afford to lose any time, especially with Jill temporarily out of commission." Wiper replied, as he glanced at the others. "Who knows; maybe Metal Sonic knows about it as well."

"But you don't even know where Mt. Solitude is, Wiper!" Newt said, as he folded his arms. "'sides, I don't think it's too smart for ya to walk out with that on your chest, y'know." he added, motioning his head at Wiper's wound.

"He does have a point, though." Proxy noted, as he looked at the group. "The longer we wait around here, the more we risk Metal Sonic and his associates taking it from us."

"Look; I'll go," Boomer said, pinching her eye brows in irritation; she was still tired after all. "I'll take Whisker with me, and Proxy can come too since he can use Chaos Control. I'm sure the radar can allow us to find the village without having to bug Jill about where it is."

"I'll come too," Brick said, "and maybe we can bring Omega along as well. Speaking of which, where is he?"

Shrugging, Proxy glanced out the window. "He must be outside. I didn't see him enter the building," he said bluntly.

"I'll go get him then," Boomer said, heading down the hall. "Hopefully, he won't mistake me for something else and accidentally shoot at me…"

Brick chuckled, "Heheh, roasted duck…"

"WHAT WAS THAT?!"

"Nothing, nothing," Brick said defensively, turning away, leaving various others to try not to snicker loudly.

"Hey Brick," Striker said, "Do you think we can come along this time? We did pretty well back at the volcano…"

"Yeah, PLEASE?!" Ani begged. "I'm getting fed up with being cooped up in this place!"

Brick took a good look at them. "I don't know," he said. "Yeah, you guys did alright before, but after what happened to Brownie…I just don't know. Part of me doesn't really want to take the chance of losing one of you out there." Then he looked at Tails. "What do you think Professor?"

Tails glanced at Brick after he asked that question, before closing his eyes. "...I don't think I'd want them to leave without someone watching over them..." he began, before he smiled, looking back at Brick. "...so you'd best take care of them, Brick."

"WOOHOO!!!" All of the kids cheered.

"Except Rudy," Charmy added.

"Aw, how come Captain?!" Rudy complained.

"Because," Charmy said, smiling, "I know how you get when you don't get enough sleep Rudy. Boomer's temper is bad enough to deal with. Don't worry though; when we find another emerald, I'll let you go the next time, I promise."

Rudy folded his arms and pouted, but he didn't argue after that.

"So, we have our traveling group." Wiper noted, as he closed his eyes. "Should they leave as soon as possible?"

"Once Boomer finds Omega, probably," Charmy replied.

Shouting was then promptly heard outside, "GAH! OMEGA! IT'S ME, BOOMER!!! STOP SHOOTING!!!"

Brick laughed. "Sounds like she did!"

Proxy and Wiper, too, couldn't help but begin chuckling. "Well, if everything's ready, I don't see why we can't begin now." Proxy noted. "Let's go."

" *Any luck tracing Angel Island yet, Calculate?* " At this point, Metal had returned to Westopolis, as he was still waiting for his subordinate to locate that island, where he could finally rid himself of the black emerald.

" *Not yet,"* Cal replied, through the communicator. *"Though for some reason, the area I'm around keeps jamming some of my signals."*

" *I* am *curious though,"* he continued. *"Just what happened to Angel Island?"*

" *I cannot tell you.* " Metal replied with a shrug, as he closed his eyes. " *I believe that Angel Island vanished long after I had been deactivated all those years ago. But no matter; just focus your efforts on finding the island, Calculate.* "

"… *.huh, now that's weird,"* Metal heard Cal mutter under his breath.

" *...hm? Did you find something, Calculate?* " Metal inquired, as he stood up from his seat, before he moved towards a sealed room.

" *All the instruments are going nuts; even the compass needle is spinning like crazy!"* the monkey replied, sounding quite surprised. *"But I just don't get why—!"* Then suddenly, Cal cut off.

At first, there was silence.

And then, *"…oh my god."*

" *...what did you find?* " Metal asked, as he opened the door, letting a cloud of steam flow out from it. " *Go on, tell me.* "

" *You might want to see it for yourself,"* Cal replied. *"I'm sending video footage to you right now."*

There was shortly a small *ding* that sounded from Metal's computer. Whenever he returned from what he was doing, he could check it out.

" *Thank you.* " he said bluntly, as he stepped into the room, just as a copy of him emerged from his body, approaching the computer screen. " *Now, what do we have here...?* "

Opening it up, Metal saw a sea of clouds in the night. Farther off, all the clouds were clustering together and spiraling around. They were darker than the night could capture, but one of the ways it revealed this mass of storm clouds was the flickers of lightning, followed by the growl of thunder.

This lightning looked quite unnatural, especially since it was green lightning.

" *One of the only instruments working is picking up a LOT of energy from this storm,"* Cal added. *"And according to the reading, it's Chaos Energy!"*

" *That's it. That's Angel Island.* " Metal said in a calm, yet triumphant tone. " *Calculate, send me the coordinates of that cloud formation; as soon as I'm finished with some business, I'll go there with the black emerald.* "

" *Alright but…"* Cal paused a minute; probably taken aback by the sight. *"…should I wait for you here, or even see if I can get in there?"*

Another *ding* popped up on the computer, and to Metal's expectations, they were the coordinates to the area.

" *Don't attempt anything foolish, Calculate; wait for me there.* " Metal responded, as he quickly memorized the coordinates. " *In the meantime...* " As he spoke, he looked back at the room his original body had entered, where it exited, something perched on his shoulder. " *...I have to pay Jillian a visit.* "

Hunter decided it could be the time to finally talk to King about the issue he had concerning his daughter. He still wasn't exactly sure how the tiger will react, hearing that Hunter now has a daughter, but he wasn't going to be drawn into one of his schemes again.

He wasn't going to be part of it whether King liked it or not.

As luck would have it, though the others were fast asleep, King was sitting on his own, looking up at the night sky, with a thoughtful look on his face.

"What're you thinking about?" Hunter asked King, noticing his look.

"Various things." King replied, without taking his eyes off the sky. "For instance... I'm still stuck on a name for the nation. I've been thinking it through, but I can't seem to get anything that sounds good..."

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Who knows, maybe it'll come to you," he said, without much interest, "but I wouldn't get too caught up with the name." Then he cleared his throat. "I need to talk to you King."

"What is it, Midnight?" King asked curiously, as he glanced at Hunter.

"There's something I should've told all of you a long time ago, but I have a daughter," Hunter started. "And she happens to be one of Jillian's friends. Her name is Anistasia Symphony."

"You have a daughter?" Hearing that, King grinned, before patting Hunter's back with some force. "Comrade, that's great! How come you've never told me about your little girl until now?"

"Oof!" That pat was a bit much, nearly knocking the wind out of

Hunter. After he coughed, he continued, "Because I didn't find out she was alive until recently. I'm been through more hell than you know King; you remember my outings about ten-eleven years ago? Hell, you probably even remember that night when GUN captured me and locked me up…"

"You were?" King asked, as he tapped his chin. "...no, I believe that Queen and I were on a mission with our units at that time. But why were you locked up to begin with?"

"I see," Hunter said. "Well GUN found out I was sneaking out. The reason I was sneaking out was because…well, I was seeing someone. But the night they caught me, she was dying, and I was trying to get help for her…" He didn't want to get into details again. "…the day we rebelled and separated, I found her grave. I figured that my daughter was dead as well, that is, until me and Sage ran into a group of them looking for an emerald."

"So, you've decided to retire and spend time with your daughter, now?" King asked bluntly, without looking at the wolf.

"That's pretty much it," Hunter said, knowing King would figure it out. "So I'm not going to be part of your nation, or whatever you want to call it. What you're planning will endanger my daughter, and I don't want that."

"...hmph." King merely scoffed, before he looked up at the sky again. "...but what could I call that nation?" he muttered.

Hunter rolled his eyes again. "Look, if you want to name your damn nation so bad, I have a suggestion; even if it might go against my nature," he grumbled. "Why not something like the Coalition Republic?"

"No..." King muttered, as he waved his hand. "No, my vision doesn't go back to coalitions and republics and all that crap." King muttered. "I envision one nation, where any soldier, no matter what background he or she has, can stand for what they truly believe in, and not suffer prejudice based on their beliefs." Then, he sighed. "A nation, untainted by governments and the like..."

"Whatever…" Hunter said, as he started walking away. "…but by what it sounds like, you have no problem with me leaving the group." Then he stopped. "…Confederate Union of Liberated Titans?"

"On the contrary; I'm very saddened that you won't stand by us any longer, Midnight." King said, as he closed his eyes. "...but you have a family to take care of. I suppose that is a priority..." Then, he gave Hunter a thumbs-up, without looking at him. "...and I'll think about using that name. Thank you."

"Sure," Hunter groaned, wondering why the hell he actually bothered to come up with a suggestion for a name, but at least King's reaction to the news was certainly a lot better than Miser's. However, he figured he'd wait around camp until the morning when everyone was awake, and maybe even until Queen joined up them, that he'd share the news with the rest of them. Then he'd return to Jillian and her friends, and ultimately tell Ani.

Hunter started to wonder what Ani went through in her life without her mother or father. He even wondered if it was anything like the life he went through…

"Oh, Midnight, another thing..." King called before Hunter could properly leave. "...even if you're not standing with us, regarding the nation... don't be a stranger, comrade."

"Alright," Hunter said. *I should probably get some sleep myself,* he thought. *I could very well need it later on…*

Cream dropped by the room to check on Jill again, only to see her sound asleep. But she didn't look very good at all; her face was pale, while flushed at the same time. She also had a look of discomfort and stress while turning over in the bed. Checking her forehead again, Cream could tell that it was still hot. "Poor girl," she murmured with arched brows.

"No signs of improvement yet, huh?" she'd hear Wiper mutter, as he stood in the doorway, arms folded. "I dropped by to say that the

emerald retrieval unit's departed... and Rudy is fast asleep."

"Thank you," Cream replied, looking back at him. "But I don't understand." She looked back down at Jill. "If she has the power to heal, then how did she become ill?"

Wiper sighed, as he placed a hand on his wound. "There are some things that she can't heal, in spite of her ability..." he muttered. "...I suppose Callous did some number on her..." Then, he turned away from the room. "In any case, we should let her rest. We could accidentally wake her up..."

"Yeah," Cream agreed, just as she was going to follow Wiper. Then she stopped, when she heard mumbling.

"No…no, not the darkness…"

Looking back, Jill was clutching the disoriented covers, looking even more distressed, but she was still asleep. "…Please, no…" she mumbled quietly. Cream watched her longer, until Jill released the grip on the sheets and managed to calm down somewhat. She glanced sadly at Jill once more, and then she finally left the room, closing the door carefully.

Just as the door closed, however, something small floated next to the window in Jill's room, before it began pecking against it, in an attempt to get Jill's attention.

For awhile, she didn't respond, but at some point she finally jolted awake. She sat up from her bed slowly, holding her dizzy head in agony before she spotted the object in the window. Drowsily, she struggled to get to her feet and to the window to see what it was.

As it turned out, it was a small, orange fox plushie, which bore an uncanny resemblance to Tails. What stuck out, though, was a red gem that kept it suspended in the air, and which also allowed it to move. " *...can Jill come out and play?* " it asked.

Jill blinked, still drowsy. "I'm sorry," she said. "Jill is sick." She was so tired; she didn't even wonder what the heck it was or what it was doing by her window.

Apparently, being sick fogged her ability to think.

" *Oh...* " the doll said, seeming a bit disappointed. " *...but do you think Jill could come out, anyway? Big Bro wants to ask Jill something...* "

Jill blinked again. "…I don't know," she mumbled. "I guess I probably could, but I might get sicker…"

" *...oh, you're Jill?* " the doll said, as it actually clapped its hands together. " *That's great! Then... can I and Big Bro come in, if you can't come out?* "

"…that'll work," Jill muttered, while obliviously opening the window for the little doll in her stupor.

" *Yay!* " the doll cheered, as it hovered into the room, before glancing outside again. " *Come on, Big Bro!* "

At that point, a long, silvery tendril suddenly flew in through the window, headed for the door, instantly locking it. Then, before Jill could fathom what was going on, the tendril began reforming into a shape she'd find too familiar. " *...hello, Jillian.* " Neo Metal Sonic said.

Jill's eyes widened, realizing what she just did. She trembled, due to the frailty of her sickness combined with fear, and then she looked down at the ground, before she closed her eyes. "Metal," she uttered.

" *That it is. Good to see that you haven't forgotten me.* " Metal said, as he glanced around the room. " *So, these are your quarters... seems fairly homely.* " Then, he looked back at Jill. " *So you're sick? Oh, dear; that doesn't sound good.* "

"…it was Callous' doing," Jillian replied, sitting back down on the bed when she felt too tired to stand. "She took me somewhere for questioning and…" Jill shuddered to think about it. No matter what she went through, or how long ago it was…

…she was still afraid of 'the darkness.'

" *Did she, now...* " Metal muttered, as he looked at Jill. " *I don't suppose that another round of questioning from yours truly will worsen your condition?* "

"It won't," Jill replied, still not looking at Metal. "After all, Callous did plenty of other things to me…I'm sure you're straight to the point…" She couldn't stop herself from shaking so much.

" *Indeed...* " Metal muttered, as he folded his arms. " *Now, would you be kind enough to tell me about the host of the black emerald?* "

"His name is Deity Novagod," Jill replied without argument. "He's a vampire, but not like an ordinary one that drinks blood. He feeds on any kinds of energy, mostly life energy. By devouring someone's life energy, they become a lifeless, mindless slave that he can control like puppets."

"Once he had a taste of Chaos Energy though, he was hooked on it. He went around the different Zones, hoping to consume the various amounts that were free in the zone. It made him more powerful the more Chaos Energy he consumed, which technically digested into Corruption energy for his use."

Finally, Jill looked up at Metal. "I don't know why he hunted me down, but I've seen what he can do, and Callous is nothing compared to him."

" *Is that so?* " Metal muttered, before he turned away from Jill. " *Well, then I suppose that you'll be delighted to know that Novagod will remain in his prison. I've stopped using the black emerald to collect Corruption, and I've sealed it somewhere no one can break it out from.* "

"…why the change of heart, Metal?" Jill asked curiously. "I don't mean about that android getting away either…it's something else."

" *...you probably won't believe me when I say this...* " Metal muttered, as he glanced at Jill from over his shoulder. " *...but your mother gave me a warning.* "

Jill gave Metal a shocked look. "…y…you've seen her too?" she

asked, standing up.

Too? Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. " *...she appeared before me in Westopolis. To be honest, I couldn't believe it at first, but then again, it's not the most surreal thing I've experienced.* " he shrugged. " *In any case, she warned me of the dangers of overusing the black emerald, so I decided to stop.* "

Jill was silent for a minute, and then she spoke, "...I see. Are there any other questions you have for me?"

"..." Metal was silent, as he rubbed his chin. *"...do you have a CD of some kind?"* he asked.

Jill rubbed her eyes, wanting to go back to sleep. "What for?" she asked.

"You'll see when I get one." Metal replied, as he glanced at her. *"Now, do you have one, or not?"*

Jill yawned while walking to a desk in the room. Opening a drawer, she pulled out a CD and held it to Metal. "Here," she muttered, starting to fall into her drowsy stupor again.

"Thank you." Metal muttered, as he looked intently at the CD. *"...I do have to ask; when are you going to ask the question 'Why haven't you tried killing me yet'?"*

"Probably when I'm more awake and aware," Jill muttered. "Right now, you could be my best friend for all I care..." then she yawned again and rubbed her eyes. Being sick didn't bode well with exhaustion.

"...is that so..." Metal muttered, as he eventually handed the CD to Jill. *"In any case, consider this as a* parting gift *. I'd reckon that you'd find its new contents of interest. But you can only view it by yourself; don't let anyone else see what's on this CD."* Then, he glanced down at the doll. *"And I'll leave* TailsDoll *here, to ensure that you don't let anyone else view it."*

"So I get to play with Jill?" Tails Doll said in a giddy tone, as it clapped its hands. *"Big Bro is the best!"*

"Alright then," Jill said. Looking down at the Tails Doll, she tilted her head in some curiosity. "Why does the doll look a little like the Professor?"

"A choice of design by Eggman, nothing more." Metal said, as he approached the window, before glancing at the doll, who was now perched on Jill's head. *"...one last question, before I leave."* he said, as he folded his arms. *"Apart from draining* Corruption *from it and simply smashing it... is there any other way for Novagod to escape the emerald?"*

Jill blinked drowsily. "The only way I can think of, is if Deity grows strong enough to break himself free from the inside," she mumbled, "and there's no telling whether or not that might happen...." Then while looking at the CD. "...something big is going to happen Metal. I have a feeling that Deity's release is inevitable, no matter how we try to keep it from happening. That's why I'm...preparing for his return."

Jill looked back at Metal. "Maybe you ought to do the same."

"...maybe I should." Metal muttered, before he suddenly clenched his hands into fists. *"But remember this, Jillian; the only one who has permission to end your life is me. If Novagod escapes from the emerald, then I expect you to persevere."* Then, he looked back at Jill. *"Promise me that."*

Something strange suddenly occurred in Jill, which gave her a strange smirk...

A *familiar* smirk.

"Promising my life in your hands?" She hummed. "How touching Metal..." Then her smirk vanished, as she blinked, wondering what in the world happened. Touching her head, she looked back Metal. "Sorry, don't know where that came from."

"As for that...I promise that Deity won't be the one to take my life. That, I assure you," she finished.

"...good." Metal said with a nod, as his body began morphing into a

smaller form, which began flying through the window. *"Until we meet again."* Then, he vanished fully.

"...Jill, do you think you should sleep?" Tails Doll suddenly asked, as he looked down at Jill. *"I think Big* Bro *doesn't want you to be sick, so maybe you can sleep before we play...?"*

"Uh," Jill was still wondering why she suddenly acted like that, as Tails Doll had snapped her out of her thoughts. Before answering the doll, she took the CD and stuck it within an envelope, then she hid it under some things in the drawer that she had pulled out; hoping to look at it later when she was ready to. "Yeah, I think I'm going to rest some more," Jill said, taking the Tails Doll off her head as she tested her forehead with her hand. It still felt fairly hot, though she didn't need that to know she was still under the weather.

Setting the doll down on the end of the bed, Jill then crawled onto it and set her head on the pillow. "...you alright with me sleeping some more?" she asked the doll, peering down at it.

"As long as we can play, later on." Tails Doll said cheerfully, before he lied down on the bed as well. *"* Sweet dreams *..."*

"Yeah....sweet...." Jill didn't even finish having fallen asleep that quickly.

"Whew, Chaos Control sure is convenient," Boomer commented.

"Indeed." Omega nodded, as he looked around. ***"So, is this the area?"***

"Judging from the data, the emerald shouldn't be too far from here." Proxy muttered, as he hid the Chaos Emerald on his person, before looking around. "The question is... where is it hiding?"

"Boomer, did you say it was in the village, or nearby?" Brick asked.

Whipping out the radar, Boomer took a look. "...it looks like its in the village somewhere," she said.

"Does that mean we have to go ask people in Jill's village about it?" Striker asked.

"In the middle of the night?" Brick said. "Not likely. Maybe it's just sitting in the village somewhere."

"Sure Brick, no one's going to notice a large, shiny jewel," Boomer remarked sarcastically. "My best guess is that someone might have it."

"Well, we ortin' ta be quick; we could be mistaken fer burglars." Whisker suggested, as he folded his arms.

"But aren't you a pirate robot?" Omega quipped.

"Ahoy, that`s inconsequential!" Whisker snapped back.

"Let's just get this over with as quick as we can. The less attention we attract to ourselves, the better." Proxy said, as he looked around the area.

Meanwhile, Jack was thinking. "...if that one was on top of the snow mountain... and that one was in a volcano..." he muttered, before he snapped his fingers. "Maybe it's on the top of the mountain?"

Boomer stared at the radar. "All we know for sure is that it's on this very mountain, so we should just look arou--AGH!!!" Suddenly, Boomer was snapped up in the air, and before the gang knew it, she was hanging upside-down from the trees.

"Hey Boomer, what are you doing up there?!" called Ani, pointing at her.

Boomer looked at one of her feet. There was a rope wrapped around it. "I must have fallen into a booby trap," she uttered.

Brick laughed. "It just isn't your night, is it?"

Boomer growled. "Could someone get me down?!"

"No! I wanna see her head explode!" cheered Ani.

"Hey, we won`t be havin' any o' that!" Whisker said, as he aimed his hand at the rope holding Boomer up, just as it shot out, cutting the rope and letting the duck fall to the ground, though Whisker caught her. "Ye be okay, ma'am?"

"Yeah, I'm okay Whisker," Boomer replied, getting to her feet.

Meanwhile, Brick picked up the radar and started heading in the direction it was pointing too. *Hm, if there are booby traps around here, it makes me wonder what the locals are like,* he thought.

"Do you guys think that there could be more of these around here?" Jack asked, as he looked around.

As they talked, Proxy folded his arms, as he looked after Brick walking.

Hearing Jack, "There probably are more around here, Jack," Brick replied, without even looking back at them. "Just keep an eye out for them, okay?" Seeing Brick with the radar, Boomer went and followed, along with the kids, and presumably everyone else.

The group walked in silence for a good while.

Then they came across a really tall fence made from logs; it seemed more like a wall than a fence. Brick glanced at the fence, and then at the radar. "...the village is behind that wall," he said.

"Great," Boomer said. "Lets walk around this wall until we find the entrance."

With that, the group did that, which finally led them to a gate. There were two guards that were standing by; both of them armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows. They also didn't look that friendly. One of them turned to see the group approaching, and he immediately aimed an arrow for them. "Who goes there?!" he bellowed, which startled some of the kids.

Especially Milo and Buddy, who clung to Brick after he yelled. Brick had to push them away. "We're just looking for something!" Brick

called back.

"What could outlanders like you be looking for in our village?" the same guard demanded, which at that point, his bow was pushed down by someone else.

"Calm down. They don't look hostile."

The man that spoke was a tall, strong ram. His brown wool was long enough in the back that it was wound up in a ponytail, and his horns were big, which were a familiar maroon color.

Out of the group, Boomer and Brick gawked at this man. There were some traits about him that they recognized, and they both wondered if he could be...

The man walked up to the group, looking at all of them and then looking softly at the kids. Then he glanced back at the guard. "Now, do you think dangerous men would carry children with them?" he asked.

"B-but sir!" the guard protested. "....they could be kidnapped, right?"

"Nice try," The ram replied, looking back at the kids then, "but these children don't look like they're being held against their will. In fact, they all look pretty cheerful. Isn't that right?" he asked the children.

"Yeah," Striker replied. "We're just looking for something mister, and it happened to fall into your village."

"Really now?" The ram asked, rubbing his chin with interest. "...It wouldn't happen to be a large, purple jewel would it?"

"Yes!" Boomer responded immediately. "Yes it is! Do you know where it is?!"

The ram laughed at Boomer, "Alright, alright, calm down now. Yes, I know where it is. I found it one day and took it to my home, but if it belongs to you, I'll be more than happy to give it back."

"Thank you very much sir," Brick said. "Uh, would it be too much if we asked for your name?"

"Not at all," The ram replied, smiling. "My name's Ray; Ray Condit."

Hearing that name, Jack, Proxy and Whisker eyed Ray with surprise. "...Condit?" Jack asked.

"Isn't that..." Whisker uttered, as he scratched his head.

"In any case..." Proxy said, as he folded his arms, before giving Ray a nod. "...we appreciate you giving us the emerald. It's a huge help, really."

"I'm glad that I can help," Ray said. "If you would follow me, I can lead you to my humble abode." That was enough for the group to follow him as Ray walked toward the gate, with the nervous guards eying the group; especially Whisker and Omega.

Unknown to them, someone lurked within the trees. Hearing Ray introduce himself, he couldn't help but be shocked. So as quietly as possible, he followed them within the trees.

Once getting through the gate, the group would see the village. Due to the fact it was in the middle of the night, there was no one out, and it was dark. The houses looked like they were carved right into the trunks of the trees. "Interesting architecture," Boomer commented while looking at each of these houses.

"You'd be surprised when you walked into one of those tree-houses," Ray remarked. "They can go up to about eight floors."

"Wow! That's cool!" Striker said.

"Boring..." groaned Ani.

Finally at some point, they reached a home. However, it wasn't like the other houses that were carved into trees; this one looked more like a cabin. The lamp was hanging outside, and it was on. "Please, come inside," Ray said, opening the door. Once inside, the group discovered that despite the way it looked on the outside, the cabin looked completely different on the inside. Inside, it looked like a very nice house.

"Wow! What a nice place to live!" Milo commented.

Brick looked around. Next thing he knew, he walked by an end table with picture frames sitting on it. His eyes fell on one of them, which looked like a younger Ray with a little girl on his lap. She was smiling so sweetly, a smile that Brick knew so well.

It was Jill, as a little girl.

"Figured as much..." Someone right next to Brick muttered; as it turned out, it was Proxy, who had happened to glance at the photo as well.

"Woah, this place is nice! It reminds me of the clubhouse!" Jack said, as he looked at the interior with some interest...

"You have a clubhouse, huh?" chuckled Ray, who started rummaging through a cabinet.

"Yeah!" Ani said. "It's the bomb!"

Ray chuckled even more, until he finally pulled it out. Sure enough, it was a purple Chaos Emerald. Handing it to Boomer, she smiled. "Thanks," she said.

"No problem," Ray replied with a nod. It was then that he noticed Brick and Proxy looking at the photo. His smile fell, as a sad look appeared on his face. He walked on over between the two of them and he set the photo face-down so they couldn't see it anymore. "Is that going to be all?" he asked.

Brick was sort of bewildered by the way Ray acted. "Actually, sir," he said. "There's something we might want to tell you..."

"What is it?" Ray looked at Brick with the same saddened look.

"...it's about your daughter, sir."

Ray sighed, "somehow, I had a feeling..." he turned away from the group and walked over to the window. "...how did she die?" he asked.

"Wha-huh...?" Brick was even more puzzled by the question Ray asked. "No, she's still alive."

Ray shot back a look at Brick of surprise. At first, he was speechless, but then he approached Brick. "How do you know my daughter?" Ray questioned hopefully.

"She's our friend!" Striker said.

"Yeah, she is!" Jack said, as he looked at Ray. "Actually, she's over at the HQ right now!"

"She is." Proxy said with a nod, before he glanced at Ray. "Though I have to ask... what would possess you to believe that she was dead?"

Ray was so shocked to hear that not only did they know about her, but that she was with them. This made him unresponsive for a minute, and then he answered. "I just...I figured that if she couldn't come back here...she wouldn't survive on her own out there in the world."

"She...couldn't come back?" Milo asked, tilting her head in some puzzlement.

"No; she was banished from this village by the elders," Ray answered, which shocked them.

"What?! Why was Jill banished from her own home?!" Boomer asked.

"Because of the events that happened almost a year ago," Ray replied again, this time turning away from them to hide his hurt look about thinking about that memory. "That man, Deity, and what he did to everyone in the village changed our way of life, and then he burned down the village; that's why everyone is so afraid of any outsiders...My poor daughter was blamed for the mess because she was too afraid to help everyone..."

"Why was she afraid to help?" Striker asked.

"...she has pyrophobia," Ray said, looking back at them. "In other words, she's terribly afraid of fire."

"Jill's afraid of fire?" Ani asked in astonishment.

Ray nodded. Then he looked at each of them, before he looked at Brick. "...I don't think I can thank you enough for telling me this," he said. "I've been stuck in this depression, worrying over her, wondering if she was doing well, or even alive."

"To tell you the truth, sir," Brick said, before Ray interrupted.

"No need to call me sir. You're free to call me by my name," he said. "All of you are."

"...Ray, to tell you the truth," Brick continued, "she's become a noble warrior, and she's become even a hero now."

Ray looked surprised. "Really?"

Boomer sighed, "Look Brick, we really don't have time to chat it up. We should get back to HQ before the worst happens when we're not there to help out."

Ray looked a little sad again, but at least he smiled this time, glad to know that his daughter was alive; and even admired for once. Though all sadness disappeared when he thought of something. "...what if I were to come with you?" he asked.

"What?" Brick asked. as the question took him by surprise.

"I want to see her, at least once," Ray said. "I don't care if I never get to come back home again. I just want to see Jillian again..."

Brick smiled. "Ray, you're her father. You have the right to come and see her, so of course you can come. No need to be dramatic about it."

Ray chuckled nervously. Then he smiled. "Why don't you all wait outside the gate of the village for me?" he said. "There are some things I have to do first before I leave, but it shouldn't take too long."

"Just anything to get back and sleep again," Boomer mumbled to herself, as she was the first one to leave out the door, with the kids following her. Then as the bots and the android walked out, Brick joined them with one last glance back at Ray.

Chapter 26

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Moments later, the group was back outside of the fence, and away from the guards, waiting around for Ray.

"...Should we really be doing this?" Boomer asked.

"Well, he does want to see Jill again..." Jack said, as he scratched the back of his head. "I mean, he thought Jill was a goner, right?"

"Aye..." Whisker nodded, as he happened to glance at Proxy, who was looking around the forest. "...oi, Proxy, what be wrong?"

"...does anyone feel like they're being watched?" Proxy asked, as he looked curiously around.

Brick's eyes sharpened. "Yeah, I feel like that too…and part of me almost has a feeling of who it is too…"

"B-Brick, what are you t-talking about?" Milo questioned in fear, hugging Buddy helplessly.

Suddenly, the group could hear a swift, unnatural force brush through the trees, and a certain monkey leaped out, aiming to slash at Brick. Brick was just quick enough to jump away as the monkey landed on the ground.

"Cal!" Brick growled.

"Well, well," Cal said, looking at the group. "I'm not surprised you adopted the android as your pet, but I believe you have a Chaos Emerald that belongs to Metal Sonic. That, and," he turned to Brick then, "I have a score to settle with you, *Cowboy* ."

Brick flinched, and then he started growling even more. "What…did you call *ME?!"*

"Cal!" Jack exclaimed once he saw the monkey try to attack Brick.

"How did you find us?"

"I don't think that matters now." Proxy muttered, before he clenched his fist. "First things first; we'll take him out."

" ***I can get behind that idea.*** " Omega uttered, as he aimed his arms at the monkey.

Though, as the group prepared to square off, something else was observing them from the woods...

"Take me out? You're hilarious," Cal muttered. "By the way, send my sympathies to Jill for me; sorry to hear that she's not feeling well."

Brick tried to punch Cal, but the monkey only swerved around him. "How the HELL do you know that?!" he demanded.

"I have my ways," Cal said. Although, he wasn't paying attention to the fact that a rock was flying at him, and when it hit him on the head, he turned. Striker had his aluminum bat out, and Ani was providing the rocks with her telekinesis.

"Hey Cal!" Striker shouted. "Quit being such a BULLY!" And then with good speed, Striker began slugging rocks with his bat at Cal.

The monkey then proceeded to deflect the rocks with his blades, cutting most of them in half.

"Yeah, quit bullying!" Jack called out, before he whipped out his harmonica, switching the microphone on, before playing furiously on the instrument, sending shockwaves at the monkey.

As Whisker and Omega began attacking Cal as well, Proxy glanced towards the woods again. *...there's someone else there.* he thought.

The barrage of attacks would be a lot for most, but not for Cal. By quick precision he managed to avoid the shockwaves Jack shot, dodge the attacks that Omega and Whisker dished out, and still have time to cut up the rocks that Striker hit at the monkey.

Brick, however, noticed that Proxy wasn't joining in. "What's wrong

Proxy?" he asked over all the commotion.

"...something's coming!" Proxy yelled.

At that point, a black blur suddenly rushed out of the woods, with a speed so devastating that not even Cal would be able to dodge it; especially since it rocketed right at the monkey. It hit like a cannonball, sending Cal right through the wall of logs and crashing into one of the tree houses. Luckily, it appeared that no one was home.

"What WAS that?!" Striker asked, looking through the hole in the fence.

Inside the house, Cal tried to pick himself up from the rubble, wondering himself what it was that attacked him.

And the answer to that question now stood where Cal had previously been; a large, black-furred, female bear, wearing a cloak. "...what a coincidence." she muttered, as she narrowed her eyes. "I meet people from both sides at the same place." Yes, this happened to be none other than Queen.

The kids stared at Queen at first.

"Hey Striker," Ani said, "she kinda looks like she could be your mom."

Striker was taken aback. "What?! Ani, you know my mom's back in the Nameless Zone!"

Ani laughed, "I was just joking!"

Ray suddenly came around the corner and encountered the group. "What's going on?!" Ray asked. "I heard a commotion!"

Cal then stepped out of the house and toward the hole in the wall, with a very angry look on his face.

"Wait..." Whisker uttered, as he suddenly narrowed his eyes. "The GUN Base! Ye be that bear wi' Callous!"

"So she's a bad guy?" Jack uttered in surprise, as he looked at the bear in awe.

"If you think I'm with Callous, you're mistaken." Queen replied, as she folded her arms, keeping her eyes on Calculate. "I left some time ago... but while searching for my group, I began thinking."

Callous? GUN? What could they be talking about? Ray wondered in thought. It was then that he saw Cal approaching Queen, and just at the monkey would think to try and slice her vertically—

--The blade was caught between two hands. Ray jumped in and stopped Cal. "You know, I don't know what your problem is, but you look like you need to relax," Ray told Cal.

Cal tried to pull his blade out from Ray's hands, but the ram had an amazing strength. In fact, after a minute, Ray jerked his hands and broke the katana in half. Then Ray smirked at the horrified expression that Cal had on his face.

"Anyway, please continue," Ray said to Queen.

Giving a nod to Ray, Queen closed her eyes. "As I said, I began thinking... King wishes to establish a warrior nation, where no government could hope to control his or other soldiers' actions. But... would he be able to do so, with only six people?"

" ***So you decided to find a way to make such an event plausible?*** " Omega inquired, as he looked at the bear.

"Precisely. And I found one way to make his dream a reality... the Chaos Emeralds."

Brick just looked at Queen. He knew the flaw in that, remembering that Jill somehow had the ability to cancel out the emeralds when all seven were gathered; also canceling out Metal's Super form. "So what? You're planning to take the emerald from us?" Brick asked.

"Why not? They would make for a great homecoming gift for King." Queen replied, before she cracked her neck. "As soon as I have it, though, I'll leave. I have no interest in fighting any of you."

"Well listen; Queen was it?" Brick said. "We're heading back in the same direction. We know where King and his group is, and once we get back, we can negotiate."

Cal, meanwhile, didn't want any of that. "Why don't you just SHUT IT!?" And with his remaining katana, he attacked Brick.

Brick barely jumped away, getting a strand of hair from his head cut off. "Hey!" he growled. "What the hell is your problem, monkey boy?!"

"We still have a score to settle, remember?!" Cal yelled, trying to cut him again.

Brick jumped again. "Seriously, you're still making a big deal out of that? Are you really still fighting over her?"

Cal stopped. "…yes," he admitted.

"Forget it Cal," Brick said, folding his arms. "You let her go, and it's too late now; she's with me."

"Yeah, it serves you right, for being so mean!" Jack chimed in, as he stuck his tongue out at the monkey.

"If I may..." Before Cal would know it, Queen suddenly appeared behind him, before she viciously swung her paw at him, meaning to send him rocketing into the forest. "...what was that you said about King, bull?"

Seeing Cal flying through the trees, it made Brick pretty cheerful. "We know where he is, Queen," he said. "In fact, he's stationed nearby us in a camp. If you come with us, you can find them. Then we'll negotiate the terms of the Chaos Emeralds."

Being a few feet away from the group and out of sight, Cal got back to his feet, growling. *I'm sick of wasting time like this,* he thought, as he turned invisible thanks to his cloaking device. *I should finish him now!* Then he started heading for the group, and this time, they likely wouldn't see him.

"Is he..." Queen muttered, as she looked down at Brick. Suddenly,

however, she glared in the direction she had launched Cal, her eyes narrowing. "...coward! Bull, move!"

"What? What be attackin' us?" Whisker uttered in surprise.

"It must be Calculate. I hear his footsteps!" Queen growled, as she lashed her arms out at the air, jerking her head from side to side, in an attempt to locate the monkey.

But unfortunately, she wouldn't be able to find him. Cal was moving around Queen as much as he could, in order to reach Brick; his bloodthirsty rage growing by the minute. In the midst of his rage, however, he lunged sooner than he should have, and Brick unknowingly stepped out of his way…

…allowing the monkey to plunge his katana straight into someone else, before anyone had a chance to stop him.

Boomer.

Feeling an unreal pain, she dropped the Chaos Emerald she held, seeing Cal reappear right in front of her with his katana through her.

"Boomer?!" Brick blurted in fear.

"MA'AM!!!" Seeing Boomer attacked like that, Whisker immediately ran at Calculate, steam practically erupting from his head. *"YE SON O' A BITCH!! I BE GOING T' RIP OU' YER INNARDS AN' THROW THEM ON TH' SEA!"* he roared, but before he could attack Calculate, someone got to the monkey before him.

Proxy.

With a yell, Proxy suddenly warped in front of the monkey, aiming a well-placed kick at him to knock him away from Boomer, before suddenly grabbing his throat and slamming the monkey into the ground. "Don't move... or you die." he uttered in a cold, almost inhuman tone.

"BOOMER!" Whilst Proxy held Cal down, Jack and the others quickly rushed to the duck's side.

"Boomer! No! Please be okay!!!" cried Milo.

Boomer couldn't move; she couldn't even speak. All she could do is lie there on the ground, and tremble. Blood trickled from her mouth as she clutched the stab wound in her middle, cringing at the worsening pain.

Brick wanted to go after Cal as much as Whisker probably wanted to, but his attention was directed to Boomer first, running to her side. Ray went to Boomer too; doing well to pick up the emerald and stow it away on his person before he came to Boomer.

"Let me see the wound," Ray said. Boomer, of course, didn't need to argue, and she took off her hand. Looking more closely… "…if we rush her to some medical help now, she has a chance," he said and then turning to Boomer. "Keep your hand on that wound and keep yourself from losing any more blood."

Boomer nodded, and when she put her hand back on it, she flinched at the pain. Then Ray carefully picked her up with his strong arms.

"…Chaos Control," Brick uttered, remembering. Then he turned to Proxy, "Listen, if you warp her back to HQ, we might be able to help her!"

"But Brick, that'll mean that he'll let Cal go!" protested Striker. "We can't let him hurt anyone else!!!"

"Then allow me." Before Proxy could say anything, Queen suddenly grabbed hold of Cal, pinning him to the ground. "You take her away; I'll keep this coward in place."

Proxy blinked, before he nodded. "Alright. I won't take long." he said, as he ran to Boomer's side, holding the emerald ready. "Chaos Control!" Then, he, along with Boomer, Ray, Whisker, Brick and the kids, vanished into thin air.

Cal stared up at Queen, showing no remorse whatsoever for what he just did. "It was actually an accident, but I never liked her anyway," he said.

"You little..." Queen uttered, her grip strengthening, just as they

heard something click. At that point, Omega stood over Cal, as his right hand turned into a Gatling gun.

" ***Do we dispose of him?*** " the red robot uttered, as he aimed the gun at Cal's head.

Cal then suddenly smirked. A lone hand popped out of the ground out of a dark hole. Then in the blink of an eye, Cal was yanked beneath the dark hole and into the ground without a trace.

"...Callous..." Queen uttered, before she closed her eyes. "...we're done here." she muttered, as she stood up, looking down at the ground.

"Oh my god!" Cream uttered, just as she saw everyone rushing a gravely injured Boomer inside.

"What happened?!" Charmy demanded; needless to say, he was angered and scared to see one of his comrades hurt like that.

"Cal did this!" growled Brick.

"Cal? You mean you met him up there?" Tails uttered in surprise.

"Look, that can wait! Right now, she needs medical attention!" Proxy said, as he glanced down at the duck.

"Yeah! If we dasn't hurry, she..." Whisker called, as he clenched his fists.

At that point, Newt and Natal entered the room, and the sight of Boomer being injured like that made both of them incredibly shocked, Newt more so than Natal.

"Wait a minute…you're not saying you're going to Jill to heal her, are you?" asked Cream in disbelief. "You can't do that to her! She's still ill!"

"What?" Ray was absolutely baffled by what he heard. Jill can heal? She was sick?

"Grandma Cream, please!" begged Milo in tears. "Jill has to help

her! Otherwise, she'll end up like Shadow!"

"And if she ends up like Uncle Shadow, then..." Jack uttered, as he fought to hold off his own tears.

"Look, the longer we stand around here, the more her life is endangered." Proxy said, as he looked at Cream. "If Jill can't help, then we should at the very least start treating her immediately!"

Cream just didn't know. She didn't understand how Jill's powers worked, and after what Callous did to her, what if Jill couldn't heal?

"What's all the commotion?"

Speaking of which, the ewe herself stepped through the hall, with Tails Doll following no less. However, the minute that she entered the room, she stopped completely. Two things made her eyes widen; Boomer in her condition…

…and her father.

When Ray finally saw Jill, his heart almost stopped. Tears were just about to burst at the sight of his daughter.

Tails Doll kept quiet, as he looked at the scene with some interest.

"Jill! You've got to-"

"We met Cal, an' he attacked us, an'-"

Both Jack and Whisker began explaining what was going on the moment they saw Jill, though they were overlapping each other to the point where it was hard to tell what they were saying. "Hey!" Proxy suddenly shouted, stopping the two. "Listen, Jill, Boomer needs help. Can you...?"

Jill's brows arched. "…I…I don't know if I can," she uttered. "I'm going to try. I know I won't be able to heal her completely, but…" she came to Boomer that moment, and reached for her wound. Everyone watched as Jill concentrated as hard as she could, just as a scarce white glow appeared.

Her hand trembled as she tried to concentrate as hard as she could, and judging by Boomer's pained reaction, it must have been working. Finally, Jill retreated away in exhaustion. "That's all I can do…" she muttered. "I'm still too weak to heal it completely…but the good news is that she's out of the danger zone now."

Some of them sighed with relief. Ray just stared at her in awe. *When did she gain such powers?* He wondered in thought.

"If you stop the bleeding, then it will heal by itself," Jill finished.

"In that case," Charmy said, "take her to her room! Cream and I will get the First Aid!"

"Can do!" both Whisker and Newt said with a nod, as the robot took Boomer, before heading towards her room, followed by the salamander.

"Hmph... that takes care of that..." Proxy muttered, as he gave a sigh of relief.

Jill watched as Newt and Whisker took Boomer away with some relief, as well as Charmy and Cream taking off elsewhere to fetch the necessities, but now she was worn out all over again after trying to heal her. However, with the situation taken care of now, Jill turned around and looked at Ray.

"…Jillian," Ray uttered, as a smile crossed his face; he was just ready to cry with tears of joy.

Jill shared the same smile, and she was even about to cry herself. "…Dad!" she finally exclaimed, throwing her arms around her father as they embraced and cried.

As the two hugged, those who were left in the room backed off a bit, to give them some space. "...dad?" Natal questioned.

"Jill's father. We found him while looking for the Chaos Emerald." Proxy said, as he folded his arms, a small smile on his lips.

While the kids would be happy for Jill, they were suddenly preoccupied with something else…

"YOU'RE SOOOOOO CUTE!" Ani squealed, grabbing the Tails Doll and squeezing it.

" *You think I'm... cute?* " Tails Doll uttered, as being hugged like that by Ani didn't seem to bother him at all. " *That's adorable! Do you wanna play?* "

"What's that thing?" Jack asked, as he looked at the doll curiously.

"Tails Doll..." Tails uttered in a surprised tone, looking at the plush figure. "...Eggman never got rid of him?" he muttered, scratching his chin.

Both Milo and Buddy sort of recoiled away from the doll. Something about it just didn't seem right.

Striker, however… "Cool! It talks!"

"Sure, we can play!" Ani said, suddenly yanking away Tails Doll along with her. "C'mon guys!!!"

"Hey, wait up Ani!" Striker called, running after her.

"Yeah, hang on!" Jack called, as he ran after Ani and Striker.

"Wait, kids, don't-" Tails began, but they were gone before he could finish. "...just be careful..." he muttered, as he glanced at Jill. While he wanted to ask her how Tails Doll had gotten into the HQ, he didn't want to break up the moment between her and Ray.

Brick walked up next to Tails, watching Ray and Jill hug. "How were things over here Professor?" he asked, finally turning to the old fox.

"It's been quiet, for the most part." Tails replied, as he glanced out the window. "Though, King and his group have been laughing a bit loudly at times, but nothing too major..."

"I see," Brick replied. "By the way, we also ran into Queen."

Hearing that, Natal glanced at Brick. "...really? Where is she?"

"We ran into her on our way out," Brick replied. "I told her that King

was with us…sort of. Omega's with her, so he should lead her back here eventually…"

"Do I really need to save your ass that much?"

Again with the darkness. Cal felt dizzy again, and he hoped awhile back that he didn't have to feel it. While he was sitting rubbing his head, he could hear Callous walk around him. "What? Are you angry with me?" Cal asked curiously.

"Nah, not really," Callous replied, before she knelt in front of Cal, smirking. "I must say Cal, I never saw you that intent on killing someone before." Then she leaned closer, giggling. "I think that's hot."

"Wah?!" Suddenly realizing what kind of situation Cal was, he started scooting away from Callous. He was also unaware of the fact that he was turning uncontrollably red.

Just then, Callous grabbed the tip of his tail, which kept him from scooting away any farther. "What's the matter? Afraid of me?" she asked deviously.

"Not…exactly," Cal uttered.

"Got yourself in trouble again? *I'm starting to lose count of how many times that's happened at this point."* Cal would hear Metal say over his communicator, and likely, so would Callous. *"Just give me the scoop on what happened, and be quick about it, Calculate."*

Cal was somewhat relieved to hear Metal, and he pressed the communicator in his arm. "I fought them for an emerald they found; which surprisingly was located in Jillian's home. Believe it or not, her father was with them, and while I lunged at a *certain someone* , I ended up almost taking the life of an ex-comrade of mine. I think that backfired though, since they used the emerald to warp away to get her medical attention."

"Then I jumped in and yanked him out of the situation," added Callous.

"Really..." Metal noted. *"Well, I'm almost done with my job. You just*

get back to Westopolis ASAP, and we can talk then. Until next time." Then the line went dead.

Cal got up from where he sat, snatching his tail away from Callous. "Listen," he said sternly; which was so unlike him. "I'm an android. There's nothing about me that you'd want, so why the hell are you pursuing me like this?" Cal was starting to get irritated with Callous…

…however, Callous suddenly grabbed Cal's throat, and knocked him against an invisible wall in the darkness. This act startled Cal enough that he remained silent, while Callous just smirked at him. "I don't need a reason to do what I do," she said. "That's what makes me so spontaneous. Besides, it doesn't matter what you are; I could shape you into something else if I wanted to."

Cal was about to protest, but he couldn't even start just as Callous thrust her lips on his. Remembering Metal's advice, he tried to resist it…but for some reason it wasn't working. He only found himself helplessly wanting more of it. When she pulled away, he was baffled. "Why…?" he muttered. "Why can't I—"

"—resist it?" Callous finished. "Because, my dear Cal, Corruption can happen to anyone and anything regardless of what it is or who they are…" Cal suddenly looked down, and he saw the darkness crawling up his legs and reaching his abdomen. Callous chuckled. "You're lucky that I like you; because I can make it as painless as possible." Now it was getting up to Cal's neck, and he was on the brink of panic. It was at that point that Callous gave him another kiss, which strangely calmed the monkey.

"In fact, you'll enjoy it," she chuckled again, deviously. "A lot."

While Cal was afraid of what she meant, another part of him almost…liked that idea. He suddenly relaxed substantially, and allowed himself to be taken with Callous, kissing her until the dark took him over completely.

Finally, dawn came. Most of those in the Chaotix HQ had gone back to sleep, while others decided to stay up.

One of those who stayed up was Wiper, who was sitting out on the stairs, looking out at the horizon. *It's been about a week, now...* he thought, as he closed his eyes. *...but...* With a sigh, he stretched out his arms, yawning. *I should get in touch with the commander, before I catch some shut-eye.*

Ray was simply walking around outside this morning. He was thinking about all the things his daughter told him.

Her horrible past after she left the village…

Then meeting Brick, Tails, and the entire adventure they've had so far. *My daughter…* he thought in disbelief. *…I had no idea she was capable of such great things…*

Like mostly everyone, Jill had gone back to sleep. There were a lot of things she didn't tell her father; for instance, her dead mother said to be walking around, or Tails' dead friends talking to her in her head. She knew her father would be taking in a lot, and she didn't need to add to it with things that sounded absolutely absurd.

It was then that Ray came across Wiper. "Oh, hello," he said. "You must be Wiper."

"That would be me." Wiper said with a nod, before he glanced back at Ray. "You're Jill's father, right? Natal told me about you." he said, before hissing.

"Yes," Ray replied to his question, "and Jillian told me about you as well."

"I'm not surprised." Wiper said with a shrug, before he stood up. "Which is an oddity; your daughter's full of surprises."

"Yeah, she is," Ray muttered, blinking as that comment reflected his thoughts before. Then he noticed Wiper's wound on his abdomen. "…just what exactly did that to you?" he asked.

Blinking, Wiper looked at the wound, before placing his hand on it. "Long story short, I got hit by a weapon imbued with dark energies. It's nothing major, though; I'll live." he said, as he closed his eyes. *So Jill hasn't told him about Callous, yet...*

"…I still can't quite understand most of it," Ray admitted, scratching his head. Then he sighed. "I just never realized how much my daughter went through alone…"

"From what I gather, she's had help." Wiper said with a shrug. "In recent times, at least... she's had the kids, Tails, Cainfield helping her move on..." As he trailed off, he gave out a sigh, followed by a hiss. "...sorry, I began reminiscing again. Bad habit."

Ray chuckled, "No need to apologize. We all do that." It got silent again, then, "Perhaps I'll check on your friend that got hurt earlier this morning," Ray said, walking away.

As Ray walked away, Wiper sighed. *...yeah, I'll call her up.* he thought, before pressing his finger against his ear. "This is Agent Wiper. Sorry for not reporting in, lately."

"No need to apologize, Wiper." the commander responded. *"In fact, I think I have some news you'll find most pleasing."*

Wiper blinked. "...and that is?"

"Well, we've managed to locate and secure one Chaos Emerald. I'll have a team send it to your position as soon as possi-" Suddenly, the line cut out.

"Hn?!" This shocked Wiper, as he gritted his teeth. "Commander, come in! What happened?"

Then, the line came back on. *"...don't worry, Agent Wiper... or should I call you Dawn?"* a male voice responded, something that startled the cobra even further. *"The GUN commander has, for the moment, been given a leave of absence. You just stay put, and we'll deal with the traitors."*

"What?!" Hearing this, Wiper grew furious. "Who the hell is this?!"

"Let's just say that the commander isn't necessarily the highest in the chain of command at GUN..." the voice chuckled, before the line went dead.

"...damn..." Wiper uttered, as he leant against a pole, holding his

head.

Meanwhile, Ray came up to the door that was presumably Boomer's and entered quietly. The first thing he saw was the duck herself, lying on her own bed with her middle bandaged up heavily; and sound asleep.

The other thing he saw was the purple salamander who sat next to Boomer's bed; while he was asleep as well, he had likely been watching over her for a while.

"Be quiet," he'd hear someone whisper, as he noticed Whisker sitting on the other end of the bed, looking at Boomer. *"She be needin' her rest."*

Ray walked up to the robot, looking at Boomer as well. "How is she?" he whispered to Whisker.

"She`s doin' better..."* Whisker muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...but that be still some wound she got."* Then, he clenched his hands together. *"If I eresee that blasted monkey again, he`ll wish that he neree'en glanced at her..."

"Hey," Ray said, "don't let it make you too angry. Hate doesn't solve problems…"

"I know..." Whisker muttered, as he looked at Boomer again. *"...but I jus' didna want t' be seein' th' lass' hurt... nay again."*

"Again?" Ray questioned. "She was hurt before?"

"Aye... she be stabbed in th' back by a wench callin' herself Callous." Whisker replied, as he sighed. "We got th' lass' fixed up..." Then, he lightly knocked his fists against his head. "...arr, I feel lower than a dried barnacle."

"Callous…" That was the second time that Ray heard that name mentioned. "…who is Callous?" he asked.

"I dasn't know." Whisker shrugged. "All I know be that fer some bloody reason, she looks jus' like Jill..."

"She—" Ray was even more curious now who Callous was, but he was almost afraid to ask. *But Jillian never told me anything about…* he thought; unless, Jill kept this information from him? But why would his daughter be secretive?

He remained silent after that, and then walked out Boomer's room. "I hope she feels better," he said before he disappeared down the hall.

"Aye..." Whisker muttered, as he folded his arms. *Ma'am... please be alright.*

Ray sat down once he found a comfortable looking couch, still lost in thought. *I've missed out on so many things,* he thought. *I can't even believe what was going on outside of our village…*

Far away, up in the sky, Metal Sonic was flying, or rather, hovering, the Egg Capsule in his hands. " *So, is that where it's been... Angel Island.* " As it turned out, by following the coordinates Cal had sent him, he had found the strange cloud formation. " *There's no mistaking it. Even through that storm, I can sense the Master Emerald.* " he said, before glancing at the capsule. *...but I wonder... would leaving him on that island be wise?*

Yes, the storm he had seen before was brewing just as severely as before.

However…toward it, Metal could catch a glimpse of someone remaining suspended in the air, watching the storm.

" *Hm?* " Seeing that figure, Metal tilted his head. " *Who's there?* " he called, without moving from his spot. *If it's who I think it is...*

The figure turned its head. As it turned out, it was that strange woman that had warned him of the dangers of the black emerald; Jill's mother.

She didn't look alright though; she looked rather pale, and her eyes were glazed. She only glanced at Metal before she looked back at the storm.

Yeah, I figured as much. Metal thought, as he approached the woman. *But what is she doing here? And... why does she look so*

pale?

Looking at the storm, she waited until Metal reached her. "…I can pierce through the storm, allowing no harm to you or the emerald," she uttered; her voice frail and weak.

How is it that she's sounding so weak... when she's already dead? Metal thought, as he glanced at her, before looking down at the storm. " *Actually... I have been thinking.* " he said, as he closed his eyes. " *Angel Island is the place where the Master Emerald rests. And after a small talk with your daughter, I found out that Novagod could likely just break free on his own volition, if he grows strong enough. So... would placing him on the island be a wise move? From what I understand, he feeds on Chaos Energy, and frankly, the Master Emerald is a hive waiting to be consumed.* "

The woman just closed her eyes as well. "Even if he were to break free, he could not feed on the Master Emerald," she said. "Because, the Master Emerald currently carries a sickness that causes it to act the way it does now…a sickness that affects even spirits; which explains my condition, if you are wondering."

" *So it is safe to place him there...* " Metal muttered, as he glanced at the spirit. " *Personally, I'd prefer to see him at the bottom of the ocean, or something... but are you sure that you should pierce through the storm? I'd hate to be the cause for the termination of your very existence.* "

"It will not be the end of me," the woman replied. "Though the sickness is in the copious amounts of energy emitting from the Master Emerald, Purity can protect me. I'm just simply not strong enough myself to dispel the sickness within the Master Emerald…"

"However, the black emerald needs to be placed on the island for another reason."

" *And that is?* " Metal asked, as he folded his arms. " *I thought I asked you to stop being so cryptic back in Westopolis, woman.* "

"I must say, that most of it I don't really understand myself," the woman replied, "Which is why I might sound vague. It's hard to

explain, but by placing the black emerald on Angel Island, it will ensure a way to his downfall, should he break free from his prison."

"I do not know what will be the way that will defeat him," she said, "but I am told that my daughter plays a key role in that, and that she will figure it out should the time come…" Then she turned and smiled at him. "You could say I'm taking a leap of faith…"

" *A mighty leap, I'd reckon...* " Metal muttered, before he glanced at the capsule. " *...well, I guess I'll put off killing your daughter until after Novagod's truly perished.* " he said, before he looked at her. " *You did get that, right? I'm purposefully delaying my plans of world conquest for these events you speak of to culminate, so you'd damn well appreciate it, woman.* " A harsh choice of words? Perhaps, but Metal wasn't one to dwell on that. " *Now, let's move. The quicker I get this gem out of my hands, the better.* "

The woman paid his manners no mind. Turning to the storm, she raised her hand. "Hurry as quick as you can," she said. "I won't be able to hold it up forever, and I'm your only way out of that island."

From her palm, a small beam shot out and headed into the heart of the storm. At first, it almost appeared not to have any effect, just as the beam disappeared inside.

But then something began churning after a moment. Eventually, a big gaping hole appeared right in the storm, leading into the darker parts of its inside.

"Go right through there," she instructed, as she kept her hand up.

" *Understood. Be right back.* " Metal nodded, before he rocketed through the hole, holding onto the capsule. *Alright, Novagod... it's been nice not knowing you!* he thought, as he pushed forward, as he felt that he was getting closer.

At some point, Metal found land. Still, on the inside, it was an abnormal raging storm, where blistering winds nearly blew down the palm trees of the island, and thunder clapped every chance one would turn their back. The island was clearly covered in darkness…

But even that didn't deter Metal in the slightest, as he touched down on the island's soil. With a mild scoff, Metal began digging a hole in the ground, which he placed the capsule in, so that the wind wouldn't catch it and send it flying off the island. " *I'd place you closer to the Master Emerald, but I don't want to take my chances on it depowering me,* " he muttered, as he covered the hole, before beginning to fly out of the hole in the clouds.

On his way out, the hole in the storm promptly sealed shut, and when he reached the woman, she let out a huff of exhaustion. Then she looked at Metal. "…my name is Goddess," she said. "I'm sure introducing myself now doesn't serve any purpose, but still."

" *Goddess? That's a fairly vain name, wouldn't you say?* " Metal inquired, as he folded his arms. " *Then again, I've heard that two people are called King and Queen... but that doesn't matter.* " he shrugged. " *But the question remains... if you're doing this to help out your daughter... why have me help?* "

"Because I wouldn't wish the horrors locked up within that emerald to be cast on anyone…" she replied, as she turned and floated away, "…not even you." Then in the blink of an eye, again, she was gone.

" *...showing sympathy, even for a machine...* " Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. " *...hmph. A curious bunch, her whole family... well, back to Westopolis. I don't want to keep Calculate waiting.* " Then, he flew off.

Chapter 27

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jill shot up in her bed that instant, feeling suddenly wide awake. Also, she felt her forehead.

It felt like a normal temperature. Nor did she feel ill in the slightest.

In fact, she felt energetic enough to hop out of bed and check out the window. From what she could observe, it was in the middle of the morning; almost close to the afternoon. Opening the window, she felt a nice, refreshing breeze blow in and brush her face gently.

But she felt weird for some reason…she couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she kept getting an alien feeling about something.

" *Did you have a nightmare?* " she'd hear a childish, robotic voice say, as Tails Doll fluttered up next to her. " *I'm sorry if I made you scared... but do you want to watch a movie?* "

"Nah, I didn't have a nightmare," Jill said, smiling at the doll. "Although…" soon her eye turned to the desk. "…I might want to check what's on that CD now."

" *Yeah, do it!* " Tails Doll said with a giggle. " *But you can't show or tell anyone about what's on it, though! Big Bro only wanted you to know about it.* "

"I wonder why…" Jill muttered to herself as she opened the drawer, moving aside some things until she found the CD. Sitting by the computer on the desk, she injected the CD in the drive. Before, Jill wouldn't have a single clue how to operate even the simplest technology, but ever since she met Tails, he taught her some things.

"Let's see what we have," Jill said, as she looked on the screen.

At first, there was nothing but static, though soon, the recognizable figure of Metal Sonic appeared on screen. " *Hello, Jillian. What*

you're about to see is the final confrontation between me and Sonic the Hedgehog. If anyone else is watching this with you, Tails Doll will expel a neurotoxin that will knock them out until the video has concluded. It is very important that the information you learn of in this video remains with you; if anyone else finds out about this, there will be hell to pay. With that in mind, enjoy the show. " Then, it cut to static again.

" *Yay, now we get a scene!* " Tails Doll cheered, as he fluttered on Jill's head, looking at the screen in awe.

Confrontation with Sonic? Jill thought, intrigued all the more by it. Tails never told her about this either, and she knew that it was way too personal to ask about, but why Metal would show this to her was definitely questionable. Hopefully, the reason why she was to see this would be explained as she watched.

Soon, the static faded, and Jill would see a field of snow, likely somewhere by a mountain range. Soon, two people became visible in the snowy landscape; Sonic the Hedgehog, and Tails, both of them looking more like they did when they had encountered Whisker, if Jill would recall that video. "Sonic... are you sure that he's around here?" Tails asked, as he looked around the field with a concerned look.

"Yeah, I saw him flying toward here," the blue hedgehog replied, looking in intently at his surroundings.

Tails nodded, as he folded his arms. "...why are we looking for him, anyway? Don't you think we should focus on taking down Eggman? Or at least trying to stop Shadow from killing him on his own?"

"I wouldn't blame Shadow after what he did to Rouge," Sonic replied, rather coldly.

Rouge? Jill wondered in thought.

"But Eggman's reign is coming to an end soon. Metal seems like the only thing that could take over Eggman's dirty work, so we need to make sure he isn't around anymore…and that means a final showdown with the Metal-head!" Sonic continued.

"Yeah, but still..." Tails muttered, just as he looked up at the sky. Then, his eyes widened. "...Sonic, look out!" he exclaimed, before quickly pushing Sonic out of the way, just as something slammed right into the snow, creating a massive crater.

" *How nice of you to finally show up, Sonic...* " a robotic voice uttered, as Neo Metal Sonic stepped out of the crater, cracking his knuckles, and chuckling menacingly. " *And you've brought your friend with you. What, you didn't think that you'd need anyone but young Prower as backup?* "

Sonic simply brushed off the snow that was on him, before he glanced over at the metallix casually. "Believe it or not Metal, it used to be just the two of us against Eggman, army and all, and we both made it without a single scratch!" Then he rubbed his nose. "Now that I think about it, ever since we met Knuckles, a flood of different faces came rolling in. But that's beside the point."

"So I've got good news and bad news for you," Sonic said, waving a finger. "Good news is, that at the rate things are going, things are finally coming to a climatic end. Bad news is that this Mobius ain't big enough for the two of us."

Then a smirk grew on his face, "and that means one of us has to go!"

Jill's eyes were anxiously glued to the screen.

" *You know... I completely agree.* " Metal said, as he folded his arms. " *This planet has never been big enough for both of us. But it won't make a difference; I can easily pretend to be you when you're dead, bring down Eggman, and assume total control of Eggman's entire empire. And without the flaws of humanity, it will be a flawless empire.* "

"An empire ruled by machines would never work out in the long run, Metal!" Tails shot in, as he clenched his fists. "And if you think we'll just let you do as you please, you're dead wrong!"

" *Try putting your worth where your money is, Prower.* " Metal noted, before he locked his gaze on Sonic. " *This time, Sonic, you will die!* "

Then, he suddenly shot right at Sonic, aiming a punch at the hedgehog's gut.

Sonic, with his incredible speed, decided to side-step that punch as a way to toy with the war machine. "Wow, I'm scared," he chuckled. "I'm shaking in the very soles of my running shoes Metal." Then he started to charge up his feet, kicking up a wave of snow that would be sent upon Metal.

However, the wave was swiftly cut to pieces by a pair of sharpened tendrils, acting as blades. " *You should be; you're outclassed!* " Metal retorted, as the tendrils shot at Sonic, intending to cut him down.

Like jump rope, Sonic simply hopped over them with the greatest of ease. "You know, I think you might have that backwards," he said. "Just like some of the wiring in your head."

Jill couldn't stop herself from smiling, and she barely kept in a giggle or two with her hands. She just found Sonic so entertaining to watch.

" *Oh, you can snark all you like, Sonic...* " Metal chuckled, just as several tendrils shot out from his body, some of them jabbing into the ground, suspending Metal in the air, making him look like some form of spider. And of course, most of the tendrils were waving about, like claws. " *...but I've told you a thousand times; fail to consider the situation properly...* "

"AAH!" At that point, one of the tendrils suddenly lashed out at Tails, grabbing the fox by his throat, whilst another one threatened to impale the fox. "L-let go!"

" *...and you end up losing something other than the fight.* "

At this, Jill stopped giggling and gasped.

"HEY!" Sonic gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, losing his cool immediately. "LET HIM GO!"

" *...very well.* " Metal chuckled, as the tendril holding Tails up quickly retracted, leaving Tails to fall to the ground... until the one that had threatened to impale him suddenly lashed out, binding his tails

together, once again hoisting him in the air. " *There; are you satisfied?* " the Metallix chuckled, as a tendril moved close to Tails' head. " *You simply must greet Rouge from me, Prower.* "

"METAL!!!" Sonic roared with unreal rage. It was then that something started to change about Sonic, as his appearance shifted to a more…demonic air. With blinding speed, even faster than the footage could catch, Sonic shot himself at Metal in a powerful Homing Attack.

" *HNGH!* " Unable to avoid the attack in time, Metal took the full brunt of it, which sent him rocketing off the ground, making him let go of Tails. " *...oh, did I touch a nerve?* " he uttered, as he began chuckling. " *Go on, Sonic; why don't you try that again? See if you can hit me!* "

"If you even THINK about resorting to Eggman's cheap tricks," Sonic growled, as a dark aura became visible around him, "then you're going to regret it!"

"Oh my god," Jill uttered, seeing this. Sonic looked so dark, and it was just so unlike him…it was like he turned into someone else.

"Because if you try to put a scratch on my buddy again," he continued to growl, "You won't live to see daylight!" With that, Sonic came at Metal with a barrage of kicks.

However, even as Sonic attacked Metal with such ferocity, the Metallix really didn't seem affected. " *I really DID touch a nerve! Imagine that; all it took to make the high and mighty Sonic fall from his pedestal...* " At that point, a series of tendrils suddenly lashed around Sonic's feet, before hoisting the blue hedgehog up in the air. " *...was to threaten one of his friends! What a sight for sore eyes!* "

Jill didn't like what was going on at all; not only because of Metal's behavior, but by the dark appearance Sonic had so suddenly taken.

Sonic, dangling from his legs, tried his best to roll into a ball, where he freed himself by a Spin Dash slicing up the tendrils. Then he rocketed at Metal again with a dark Homing Attack.

However, he hit something different entirely; apparently, he had just blasted right into Knuckles, shattering his entire body. " *Ooh, nasty...* " Metal chuckled, as from out of the tendrils, several metallic copies of not only Neo Metal, but also many of Sonic's friends, emerged, all of them glaring at the dark hedgehog. " *Can you find the real me?* " he chuckled, as all the copies rushed right at Sonic, intending to beat him to death. As for Metal, with so many copies of the Metallix around, properly finding him became impossible.

Sonic said nothing, but he could tell immediately that the copies of his friends were fakes, doing well to take care of them first. He was so fast, he was almost invisible, as he tore apart each copy of his friends one by one; making sure to point out the real Tails from the others. Then he picked each Neo Metal copy and began lunging after them relentlessly, only finding each of them a fake copy.

Seeing how fast Sonic decimated the copies, Jill was stunned speechless.

As Sonic was busy tearing through the fake Neo Metals, however, one of them grabbed hold of him, so he was caught in a struggle of power, locking the two in place. At that point, a tendril shot out from the snow, before rocketing at Sonic, with all intents on impaling him from behind.

"SONIC, LOOK OUT!!!" However, in a turn of events that Jill would find eerily, and traumatically familiar, Tails suddenly intercepted the tendril, resulting in it piercing through his body, though stopping it from reaching Sonic. "K-kkh..."

Sonic almost stopped altogether, seeing Tails stabbed like that. "TAILS!!!"

Jill covered her mouth, as the scene affected her a great deal to a point she was almost ready to cry.

"...S-Sonic..." Tails uttered, as he weakly took hold of the tendril, feebly trying to pull it out of his body. "I... I'll be..."

" *Fine?* " At that point, while Sonic was distracted, an immense number of tendrils suddenly bound his entire body together, before

he was hoisted up in the air, where the real Metal hovered. " *Prower, I would say that you're headed for death's door at this point.* " Then, he looked down at Sonic. " *Face it, Sonic; you've failed. Now, admit defeat, and I may let you live.* "

Down below, Tails gritted his teeth, as he began searching for something on his person, despite the horrific blood loss making him stumble, even with the tendril still lodged in his body.

Bound and nowhere to run, Sonic had to consider whether to give up his pride or his friend. The hedgehog was pretty torn, especially since Tails was in a fatal condition, and he always hated these situations because he never did well with them.

The suspense was devastating for Jill, and while she knew that Tails lived to tell the tale, she was waiting to see what would happen.

However, Sonic just remained silent.

" *You choose to remain silent...* " Metal mused, as he turned his left hand into a pointed blade. " *A shame. It's been nice knowing you, Sonic the Hedge-* "

"EAT THIS, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" At that point, Tails had gotten his arm cannon in place, but instead of firing an orb of electricity, or an exploding mouse, he shot a rocket right at the Metallix, and it was a pretty large rocket, to boot.

" *What?!* " Not having anticipated something like that, the rocket struck Metal dead-on, sending the Metallix careening towards the side of a mountain, though he dragged Sonic with him, just before he crash-landed in the snow.

Jill was certainly surprised, but she kept watching to see what would happen next.

" *Ungh...* " Metal groaned, as he held his head in pain, before scrambling to his feet. " *That wasn't an ordinary rocket... crafty fox... he installed an EMP in that.* " Then, he glared at Sonic. " *Tsch... but it's not going to be enough. I'm going to kill you... like I should have from the moment I was created!* " As he stepped towards Sonic,

however, he felt the ground he stood on tremble. " *...hn?* "

Sonic remained lying there in the snow, but he smirked as he looked up. Up at the tips of the mountain above, a tide of snow was beginning to roll down the mountain, and it rapidly grew into a massive avalanche.

" *...you've got to be kidding.* " Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. " *An avalanche. Is that...* " Then, as he opened his eyes, he glanced back at Sonic. " *...you listen here, Sonic. That EMP is limiting my actions, and given the speed of the avalanche, I can either fly off, or kill you here and now.* " Then, a tendril suddenly shot out, hitting the coating that covered Sonic's body.

" *Remember this! I'm the only one who is allowed to kill you, and I will* not *have a natural disaster take that glory from me!* " Then, he suddenly began swinging around, as if he prepared to fling Sonic off. " *So until we meet again... LIVE!!!* " At that point, he let go of the tendril, sending Sonic flying away from the avalanche, but the Metallix wasn't able to save himself, as the avalanche consumed him almost immediately.

Jill blinked, watching this. She was amazed that Metal didn't decide to kill Sonic right there, but she watched as Sonic flew through the air, and eventually landed right next to the gravely injured fox.

"S-Sonic!" Despite his injury, Tails trudged over to Sonic, before he attempted to free Sonic from the prison Metal had made, but he didn't exactly do much progress. "Just hang on... I'll get you-" he uttered, before he coughed up some blood.

In spite of that, after a while, the metal around Sonic began dissolving into a liquid state, like water, freeing him, and removing the tendril rammed through Tails.

Now that he was free, he jumped right onto his feet and immediately picked up Tails. "Hang on, okay?" he said, as he took off running with his unbelievable speed. "You're not going to die on my watch! I promise!"

"Y-yeah..." Tails said with a nod, before he glanced at where the

avalanche had erupted; at the moment, it seemed to calm down, but there was no sign of Metal anywhere. "...do you think that he's really..."

"No, he'll be back," Sonic replied that instant, without a doubt.

"...I guess so..." Tails said with a nod. At that point, however, the video feed cut out, leaving it static once more.

"Sonic was right; I did return... but only after he had passed away. I never did find out what killed him; old age, a battle, an illness... the thought of him dying at anyone but my hands was... torture, to say the least. That's why, Jillian, you have to remain alive. Do not let anything kill you, until the time comes for our final battle. Maybe that will put me at ease... knowing that I could kill someone who stood in the way of my rule." At that point, even the static cut out; the video was over.

"...Big Bro really thinks that you're important, Jill." Tails Doll uttered, as he was still lying on Jill's head. *"You're not going to die before then, are you?"*

Jill was still somewhat stunned. Once the CD popped out of the drive, Jill took it and stared at it thoughtfully. It answered her question why Metal wanted her to see it for sure, but this sort of act seemed to reveal a side of Metal she hadn't expected. It seemed like taking her life was so important to Metal, that he would stop at nothing to do it. He even made her promise that he would be her killer.

A strange promise, but still...it was a promise. Despite how cruel the idea really was, Jill had to admit that Metal was unusually...soft.

Eggman, she suddenly thought. *You could have given him a better purpose than to kill.*

Remembering that Metal didn't want anyone else to see it, she snapped the CD in half, rendering it as totally useless now. "Well, I'll make sure that Deity won't kill me," she said, answering Tails Doll. "As for Metal, that's left to be determined."

"Ooh, that sounds great!" Tails Doll said happily, before fluttering off Jill's head. *"Big Bro is gonna be happy, and that makes me very happy!"*

Jill still didn't know what to say, but she threw away the halves of the CD while thinking. Maybe she could find a better purpose for Metal than that. Sure, it would be crazy, and chances were slim that he'd listen, but it didn't hurt to think that she could do something for him other than give up her life at his hands. For now, she just aught to worry about other things.

"It's nice to hear that you're happy...I guess," Jill replied, as she opened the door and headed out into the hall.

Out in the woods, in King's temporary base of operations, King, Miser, Ripper, Sage and Hunter were gathered around the fireplace, with King telling the group a story, and both Miser and Ripper laughing, due to its ridiculous nature. "And then... after I fried their defenses, their chief says this: 'You're fairly optimistic for a killer,' and then I go, 'Well, I've always considered myself the positive kind!'" Then, the three began laughing again, and even the usually stoic Sage couldn't help but chuckle at that bit, even if it was a lame pun.

Hunter wasn't laughing however. To be honest, King's stories have never interested him, and besides that, he had things on his mind.

"Hoo..." Heaving for breath, King wiped his eye, as his laughter subsided. "Aah, the times we were out on the field were the best, weren't they?"

"You said it, King! Kekekekekeke!" Ripper cackled.

"Well, I have to admit; it wasn't too bad." Sage said with a shrug, as she glanced towards the woods; while no one else would see or hear it, Sage instantly knew that Wiper was hiding behind some tree, a gesture that she found cute.

At that point, however, the group did hear something in the woods,

but not where Sage had looked. Glancing towards the sound, King raised an eyebrow. "Who's that?"

Hunter shrugged. "Don't know, but I highly doubt it's anyone hostile..."

Sage blinked, before she smirked. "You're right. It's an old friend."

Just as she said that, two persons approached through the woods; namely Omega and Queen, something which made the majority of those present wide-eyed. "...my friends." the bear said, as she managed to smile a bit.

Miser looked like she was just about ready to break into tears, whilst Ripper seemed to grin even wider than he usually did. King, however, was the one who reacted the most upon seeing her; by suddenly leaping off his seat, and grabbing her in a bear-hug. "QUEEN! You sure had me worried, comrade!"

Hunter smiled. "Queen, you finally made it."

"I did, I suppose." Queen responded, as King released his grip on her. "It's good to see you all again." Then, she got a bit more serious look. "What about Dawn?"

"I'm right here." At that point, Wiper walked out of the woods, his eyes focused on Queen. "Hello, Dusk."

With only a silent nod to Wiper, Queen looked at King again. "Still working on your warrior nation, Twilight?"

"Ah, that! Well, it's still in planning-stages only, but I have a feeling that soon, we'll get a massive opportunity!" King said in an enthused tone.

"Why do you think that, King?" Hunter asked; even if he had already told everyone he wasn't part of the plans, he was still curious.

"I have a feeling, that's all!" King said, as he placed his hands on his hips, laughing. "And it will work out!"

"Actually, I believe I have a method we could use to get the nation

underway." Queen said, something which immediately made King look back at her with an surprised expression.

"Really? And what would that be?" Miser asked curiously, looking at the bear.

"Simple; the Chaos Emeralds." Queen responded.

Hunter looked at Queen with a kind of shocked look. That didn't sound like a good idea to him, because that would interfere with Jill and her friends; more importantly, his daughter. Hearing this, Hunter stood up and began walking away. *Mind as well just walk away now,* he thought.

"Hey, hey, where are you going?" At that point, Ripper took hold of Hunter's shoulders, before forcefully placing him back on the ground. "This could be interesting, so let's listen! Kekekekeke!"

"In any case..." Queen uttered, as she folded her arms. "...while being with Metal Sonic for a brief time, he was gathering the Chaos Emeralds, intending to use them to power himself up, or something along those lines. And he was also using one of them to drain energy out of... in any case, the emeralds could be what we need."

"Hrm... but how would it work?" King muttered, as he folded his arms. "It's not like we can wish for the emeralds to grant us a nation like the one I envisioned..."

"We could figure something out. In any case, Omega told me that those living close-by here has some Chaos Emeralds. We could-"

"Out of the question." Wiper said, as he folded his arms, hissing. "Jill and her friends need those emeralds, to keep them safe from the hands of Metal Sonic, along with others who would abuse them."

As the group was talking, Sage got a bit of an uncomfortable look, as she covered her body with her wings, keeping an eye on Queen.

"I agree," Hunter said. "Using the Chaos Emeralds for personal gain brings more trouble than you're asking for."

"We wouldn't necessarily have to use them ourselves." Queen

suggested, as she folded her arms, looking at Hunter. "We could sell them. From what I recall, one of them could go for millions on the right market."

"Like the black market?" Wiper said with a hiss, before shaking his head. "You know, as an agent of GUN-"

"Don't mention that name in my presence." Queen suddenly growled, glaring at Wiper. "After what they did to all of us, you're still defending them?"

"Not all of GUN's men are as heartless as those who put us through that trial, Dusk." Wiper noted, as he closed his eyes. "...damn it; I had hoped to forget about that."

Hearing that, King looked at Wiper curiously. "Hn? Forget about what?"

Hunter decided not to egg Wiper on, but he was curious what Wiper meant exactly. He glanced over at Wiper in questioning.

"...earlier today, I called the GUN commander, to see if she had found any leads on Chaos Emeralds. She said that they had found one, and that she'd send it over to the HQ, but..." Wiper began, as he held his head, his eyes closed. "...before she could finish her sentence, she was cut off the line."

"Cut off...?" Miser asked, as she tilted her head.

"And then... someone else told me to stay put, and that they'd deal with the 'traitors'. He also said something about the commander 'not being the highest in chain of command'..."

Hearing that, Sage looked at Wiper with a surprised look, Ripper with a confused look, Miser with a horrified look, Queen with a serious look, and King with an enraged look. "Son of a... they're gonna deal with us?!" King muttered, as he clenched his hands into fists.

Hunter was also horrified. If that was true, that would mean that GUN could disrupt everything for everyone; they could find out about Ani... Then he growled. "They're not going to get us. Not if Jill might

have anything to say about it."

"No... no, we won't rely on her." King cracked his knuckles. "If they want us, they'll get us. We don't have to involve anyone else."

"Kekekekekeke! It'll be fun to kill something that breathes again!" Ripper cackled, as he licked one of his blades in anticipation.

"Wait... something got me to think a bit." Sage shot in, as she stood up. "Wiper said something about the GUN commander not being the highest in command... but who could possibly be higher than the commander?"

"...Not sure," Hunter said. "But..." Truthfully he was stumped. While Jill could possibly help them a great deal, it would also involve Ani. It didn't matter though; at some point, he had a good feeling they would get involved.

"In any case, it seems that GUN are going to start chasing you." Wiper said, as he folded his arms. "I don't know what you should do, but-"

"It's obvious; we go out and face them." King said, as he faced his comrades. "But if they're gonna face us, this probably wouldn't be the best place... Jill and her friends could get hurt. So we'll have to move out." Then, he looked at Hunter. "All of us."

Part of him wanted to protest, but he also knew that he was being hunted, and if he was at HQ, things could get bad. Against some of his wishes, he nodded. Then he turned to Wiper. "What about you, though?" he asked. "You're being assigned to defend Jill and her friends, not to mention your team is there."

"Actually, I have been thinking about that..." Wiper muttered, as he folded his arms. "We were assigned to defend Jill. But... over time, she's gotten even more people defending her. Whisker, Omega, Proxy, and not to mention the kids and Cainfield..."

"But what's the problem with staying and lending a hand?" Sage inquired.

"...truth be told, the only thing that keeps me at the HQ is my

mission, and... frankly, I think the others have it covered. But additionally, I have no further reason to stay. Natal seems to get along with the kids, and that's not even getting into Newt and Boomer..."

"Then come with us!" King said, as he placed a hand on Wiper's shoulder. "It will be just like the old times, out on the field, away from their watchful eyes!"

"...I need time to think about it." Wiper said, as he pushed the hand away. "I've got to think about a lot of things..."

Hunter, for the first time in awhile, looked sad. *Finally, I find my daughter,* he thought. *And now I have to leave her again.* Maybe he aught to just go to Anistasia and tell her the truth, before he's gone for good.

"...I'll go back to the HQ." Wiper said, as he turned away, giving the group a wave. "You'll stay until morning, I take it?"

"Yeah." King said with a nod. "Don't hesitate to tell me if you're coming with us or not."

As they watched the cobra leave, Sage couldn't help but glance at Hunter. *...hang in there.* she thought, closing her eyes.

Seeing Wiper leave, Hunter stood up. "Dawn, wait," he called. "I'll come with you." Then the wolf ran off to follow Wiper.

"Well, judging by the event of things, I'd say you won't be staying long?" The group would then turn to see Flamenco sitting against a tree with folded arms. "In that case, would it be alright if I were to accompany vosotros?"

"A-and me, maybe?" Behind Flamenco, Lin stood, bashfully holding her left side, looking at the group. "Y-you don't have to t-take us along..."

"...who are they?" Queen asked, as she folded her arms, raising an eyebrow.

"Beats me; they're two people who showed up around here a little

after we set up shop." King said, as he observed the two. "Well... it depends. What can you do?"

The instant King asked that, he'd find his whiskers plucked off suddenly, and an F appearing on a tree stump. Flamenco already had his sword out, and he was in a proper stance. "I've studied all my life Senor," he replied, a smirk on his long beak. "Even when impaired by the drink, my skills do not fail me."

"Oh! And check what I got!" Immediately, Lin showed off her artificial right hands, enthusiastically swinging the fail-arm around, accidentally smashing the tree Flamenco had carved the F into. "I still don't know what to put on my third arm, but I have been considering a gun of sorts!"

"..." Blinking, King patted the area where his whiskers once were, looking at Flamenco and Lin with some interest. "...we leave in the morning." he said, before stretching out his arms. "You can decide if you're really willing to travel with outcasts like us; you're going to be hunted by GUN. But I'm not gonna stop you."

"I don't mind whether or not my life is at stake," Flamenco replied, glancing at where his F was smashed by Lin's arm. "You could say I join out of sheer boredom." Then he glanced at Sage and Miser. However, when he noticed Queen, he almost jumped. "Well, seems we meet again Senorita," he said to Queen. *I wonder why I did not notice her there before,* he thought to himself.

King blinked, before he glanced at Queen. "...you know him?"

"No." Queen shrugged. "I met him when I left Westopolis... for a moment, I imagined that he would have been killed there."

"Ah, yes," Flamenco groaned with irritation, rubbing his neck as he remembered that. "Luckily, Metal let me live, but his manners were lacking, to say the least." It also reminded him that he needed a drink again. "Anyhow, I can also offer my scouting skills," he said. "This way, you needn't wander out of safety perimeters to check the 'clearing of the coast,' as you call it."

"Right..." King muttered, before he turned away from Flamenco and

Lin. "You can come along. But you'd better be prepared; none of us are any slouches. We'll be moving non-stop when the sun breaks, and we'll be on our toes the entire time. So don't fall behind."

Seeing Jill pass by, Cream sat up. "Jill, what are you doing walking around?" she asked. "Shouldn't you rest?"

"No, I'm not sick anymore," Jill said cheerfully. "I'm alright now."

Still, Cream came over and set her hand on Jill's forehead. Seeing that she was right, Cream smiled. "Well, what a relief," she said. Then she blinked, "but that was an awful lot quicker than I anticipated...I expected you to be in bed all day."

Jill shurgged. "Maybe I just have a really good immune system."

"So Jill isn't sick anymore?" At that point, Jack entered the room, looking at Jill with a smile. "That's awesome! Good to see you on your feet again!"

"Hey Jack," Jill greeted, smiling. "How were you guys doing when I was resting? Oh, and how's Boomer doing?"

"Boomer's still sleeping, along with Newt." Jack said, as he scratched his head. "And we were doing fine... but we were hoping that you'd get out of bed soon. And now you're out of bed! So maybe us hoping made you better!"

Hearing that, Jill smiled even more; it sounded adorable. "Yeah, maybe," she said.

"Oh! I don't think the others know that you're out of bed yet! I'll go tell them right away!" Jack said, before he suddenly ran back the way he came; coincidentally, right past Natal.

"What's the rush?" Natal mused, before she glanced at Jill, smiling a bit. "You're up."

"Yep," Jill replied.

"I'm sure Brick would like to know you're alright, Jill," Cream suggested, chuckling a bit.

"Oh yeah?" Jill said, turning to Cream. "Where is he?"

"He's with Tails, working on a project. When I took a look at it, I thought it looked like Extreme Gear," Cream said. "They're downstairs in the basement."

"I think I might go see them," Jill said, walking away.

As Jill walked away, Natal folded her arms, before looking back at Cream. "Oh, yeah, I meant to ask; do you know where Wiper is? I checked his room, and he wasn't there."

Cream couldn't help but look at Natal. She was still getting used to her saying more than she usually does. "He said he was going to check on his friends at their camp, last I heard," Cream replied.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the basement, Brick and Tails were sitting around a table with tools lying everywhere on the ground. Since there had been some free time, Brick figured that he'd try building up an Extreme Gear from scratch, since all his stuff was back at the Clubhouse, and he was consulting Tails for his help. After all, he was still learning about Extreme Gears...

Jill found the stairs that led her down into the basement, and she was quiet enough that she wasn't noticed when she entered the basement, seeing Brick and Tails talking.

"So...the fuel tank goes *here?* " Brick asked questionably.

"Actually, no." Tails replied, as he chuckled. "But it's close. You're supposed to place the fuel tank there, and where you guessed is where the booster goes."

"Oh," Brick muttered in realization. While fiddling around with some of the tools, his elbow bumped a capsule-like tank that fell right on his foot. "YOW!" Brick yelped, clutching his toe as he hopped.

Jill couldn't stop herself from giggling. Brick was always accident prone...

Tails couldn't help but chuckle as well, seeing Brick getting hurt like that. "Maybe we should take a small break before continuing... after all, I think there's someone who wants to talk to you." he said, as he glanced in Jill's direction; whether or not he had heard Jill when she began giggling, or when she first entered the basement, one couldn't tell.

"Huh?" Brick at first didn't know what Tails meant until he looked where the old fox was looking. "Brownie?!" Brick said with wide eyes. "Aren't you supposed to be resting?"

"I'm better now," Jill said, walking up to the two of them.

"Really?" Brick asked. "That was...quick."

Recalling that video from earlier in the back of her mind, Jill couldn't help but glance at Tails. "So what are you two working on?" she asked, without taking her eyes off Tails.

"Nothing!" Brick replied defensively, jumping in front of it to hide it from Jill.

Jill smirked at Brick. "Are you sure?"

Brick's head fell in defeat. "Aw, you already saw it, so I guess I can't surprise you," he said. "I was-er, *we* were trying to make an Extreme Gear for you..."

"...really?" Jill asked in surprise as she looked back at Tails.

"Indeed." Tails said with a nod, before placing a hand on Brick's shoulder. "In fact, it was his idea to build one. He wanted it to be just perfect, so he asked me to help, but now the cat's out of the bag, wouldn't you say?"

Brick chuckled in embarrassment, scratching his head nervously.

Jill looked at the gear in construction. Right now, it wasn't really looking like much of anything, but it was still more sophisticated than Jill could ever comprehend. "I think that's really sweet of you," Jill said, smiling.

Brick turned a little red when she said that.

Tails couldn't help but smile at that, before he looked up. "Well, we've been down here for a while, so we should take that break after all. Anyone feel up for breakfast?"

"...Go ahead Professor," Brick said, as he looked at Jill. "I'd like a moment with Brownie..."

"...alright." Tails said, as he went up the stairs. "But don't take too long now, you two." he added, before he vanished from view.

Once Tails left, Brick and Jill looked at each other. It was silent, up until they both smiled. "I'm glad that you're okay now Brownie," Brick said, stepping up to her. "I don't want you doing crazy stuff that gets you hurt anymore, you hear?"

"How can I promise that when you can't?" Jill asked teasingly. "You're always taking on guys 3 times your size."

"So? I *CAN* take them," Brick replied, chuckling. "I can beat 'em too."

Jill shook her head, chuckling herself. Then they stared at each other again. "This is the only time we've been alone since...well, you know," Jill said.

"Yeah," Brick said, remembering that night they confessed their feelings and how things rapidly escalated from there. All the more that he stared back at her. "...it wasn't awkward, was it?"

"No, no," Jill replied. "Not at all..." Their hands touched, which made them both smile even more. "Things have been so hectic the past week that I guess it got left behind," she added.

"Well, not entirely," Brick said. "I still think about it." Once Brick put his arms around her, they hugged warmly.

"Me too," Jill muttered, at which she then looked up at Brick once more, before they kissed longingly.

Chapter 28

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cal awoke with a start, at first totally unaware of where he was. Then he realized he was in a dark alley, and luckily it was back in Westopolis. With a sigh, he put a hand to his aching head. Just what happened? Cal couldn't remember anything at all, other than the fact he had been with Callous in 'the dark' as she called it. He felt different too, but he couldn't quite put his finger on how or why.

While rubbing his brow, his hand touched something that was taped to his forehead. Pulling it off, he discovered it was a note.

When the time comes, I'm coming back for you... it read, along with a lipstick kiss next to the writing. The instant that Cal read it all, it disintegrated into black dust, and blew away in the wind. With his eyes following the dust that blew away, he blinked. That note made him wonder even more what happened with him and Callous; and now he was getting the feeling that it wasn't anything good.

He got up, and looked at himself. He looked like his normal, android self; no physical changes whatsoever. With that assured, he tried to find his way out of the alley and into the streets of the city. He was stumbling a lot for some reason, and he felt exhausted. *Should I be feeling this?* he wondered in thought.

As he walked, however, something happened to tap his shoulder, followed by a *"Boo,"* coming from a robotic voice.

Not only did it get the desired reaction, but it was exaggerated as well. "GAAAAAGH!!!" Cal screamed, hiding behind his arms defensively.

"Oh, give it a rest, Calculate." As it turned out, it was Metal, who couldn't help but chuckle. *"It took you a while to get back. I was starting to get worried that Callous just cut the crap and pounced you. And guessing from your reaction, I'm not too far off."*

Realizing it was Metal, Cal was embarrassed, and at his comment, he was even more embarrassed. "...I don't even know what happened," he said. "I can't remember it..."

"Nothing a scan of your memories can't fix." Metal said, as he grabbed Cal's arm, before floating up in the air. *"Even though you might not remember it, the event is locked within your subconsciousness. And with your android enhancements, digging through your mind will be nothing more than a triviality."* Then, he glanced at Cal again. *"Kindergarten science, Calculate."* If it wasn't already obvious, Metal seemed a lot more... casual than usual.

And while Metal seemed more casual, Cal seemed more jittery; almost like his old self before he became an android. *This isn't normal,* he thought, noticing it and feeling alarmed. Though he tried to hide it from Metal. "Why are you so cheerful anyway?" he asked Metal.

"Dunno." Metal shrugged, as he looked towards the main tower. *"For some reason, I feel like a burden has been removed off my shoulders."* Then, he glanced back at Cal. *"But you failed to obtain a Chaos Emerald... well, we're still likely in the lead."*

Gee, that was comforting to be reminded of. Cal thought he was lucky that Metal was cheery, since he didn't get that emerald. He remembered that Metal was taking the black emerald to hide it which was probably the exact reason for his good mood. He wished he was that relaxed; right now, he felt like there was a ticking time bomb ready to explode at any minute.

"You seem kind of tense." Metal noted, as they eventually entered the tower. *"Please, if there's something on your mind, don't hesitate to tell me, Calculate."*

"I feel different; and not in a good way," Cal said. "Callous did something to me and I'm almost afraid to find out what she did..."

"Hm..." Metal nodded, as he led Cal down through some halls, before the two entered a computer room; a room Cal would recognize as the room he received his modifications. *"Just lie down*

on your bed, and I'll see if I can't dig anything up."

Cal said nothing as he did so, growing even more nervous by the second. In fact, he was getting so uptight that he was clenching his fists.

With Cal on the table, a few wires emerged from the ceiling, jabbing into Cal's head harmlessly. *"Now be still; this will only take a moment."* Metal said reassuringly, as he sat down by a computer, examining the data uploaded from Cal's mind into the console.

Cal now was getting apprehensive; he almost felt like he didn't want Metal to see what was in his mind now. *What the hell is going on with me?* he thought.

"Hrm, let's see..." Metal muttered, as he rubbed his chin. *"Okay, you went to Mt. Solitude... faced off against the bull... got yourself whooped by Queen... dragged into darkness, received my call..."* At that point, Metal tilted his head. *"Ooh, so Callous really did pounce you. I'm honestly surpri-"* At that point, his eyes widened. *"...what?"*

"...w-what did you find?" Cal asked; yet part of him had a feeling that he knew already.

"...your body... consumed by darkness...?" Metal muttered, before he swung the computer monitor around, so Cal could see as well. *"I think it would be best if you saw this as well."* he said, before he walked next to the monkey, holding his gaze at the monitor.

As Cal watched, it had picked up where it left off when he blacked out. He saw himself and Callous growing more extreme; to the point that Cal didn't want to watch it anymore. "No!" He screamed, trying to turn his head away. He didn't want to watch it at all. "That's just WRONG!!!"

"I'll say." Metal responded in a more or less neutral tone, though he wasn't as shaken by this as Cal was, as he kept watching. *"Hm... I didn't even know that females could bend like that."*

"No, stop it!" Cal screamed, shutting his eyes. "I don't want to watch it!!! How could she do that?!"

"Well, she did make several passes on you, from what I could gather... but I'd never imagine a woman to top." Then, he hummed. *"...wait, is that position even possible? She is creative, I'll give her that."*

Cal opened his palm and aimed at the monitor. After he shot, the monitor was no more, as was the scene that was playing on it. With the computer destroyed, Cal felt relieved as his head hit the table.

"...you know, Cal, there could have been more to it than just you and Callous engaging in intercourse." Metal muttered, as he rubbed his head. *"Just... go and get me a new monitor, and then return to your duties. I suppose I'll have to sit through that... experience... to see if anything of real significance occurred."*

Saying nothing, Cal pulled the wires out of his head and walked off. "....just...don't make me watch it again...please," he uttered as he left the room.

"...hm." Metal noted, as he sat down, looking at the ruined monitor. *Callous... you introduced me to the black emerald, and you try to seduce my subordinate. Just what are you scheming...?* he thought.

Cal in the meantime felt horrible, yet at the same time...he secretly liked watching it. *What's WRONG with me?!* he screamed in his head, shaking it.

Admit it, you liked it.

No! I don't want to-- Cal stopped that instant, realizing what was going on. *Did I just argue with my own thoughts?* He thought. Eerie silence was his only reply. With that, Cal grew even more concerned. He finally grabbed another monitor, effortlessly lifting the large thing thanks to being an android, and he carried it back to Metal.

When Cal returned, Metal had disposed of the wrecked monitor, before taking the new monitor from the monkey. " *Thank you. Now, would you be so kind as to start locating another* Chaos *Emerald? I need to see if this encounter left anything of real importance."* he said, before he quickly hooked up the new monitor to the computer

console.

"Yes sir," he replied, leaving the room while he got lost in thoughts again. *When the time comes, she'll come for me?* he thought. *But why...?*

When Cal left, Metal was quick to bring up that video again, going through the parts they had already seen fairly swiftly. Needless to say, as he got further into the video, the acts became more extreme. *"Sheesh, I'm surprised neither of them has broken down yet... but is this the rest of it? Nothing more that their obscene acts?"*

Eventually, the acts subsided. Cal was out cold, while Callous got dressed again, and finally carried the monkey away, chuckling to herself. "I'll admit, I never had that much fun in awhile..."

Upon seeing that, Metal would have raised an eyebrow. *Finally, some actual progress...* he thought, as he observed the screen. *Now, what's going to happen next...?*

"If I'm correct, it should be here," Callous mumbled to herself, looking up. Then as she sat Cal down, she got a strip of paper and wrote something on it, then kissed it, leaving her mark. Then she taped it to his forehead. Chuckling, she brought his chin up to her as she smirked at him. "You know, it might not be a bad idea to introduce you to Daddy," she said.

That perked Metal's interest, as he leaned closer to the screen. *Introduce him to Daddy...* he thought, as he rubbed his chin. *She's talking about Novagod, no doubt... but didn't she say that she didn't want him to break out from the emerald?* Thinking that, Metal rubbed his head. *This woman is hard to read...*

Callous then kissed Cal. "I don't know why you're crazy about Jill, since she won't be alive much longer. If Daddy figures out a way to kill her, leaving me intact, then I'll be free, and then we can get rid of Daddy..." Chuckling again, Callous hoisted Cal over her shoulder again. "That is, if the toaster won't have anything to do with it."

Then eerily, Callous looked straight at the monitor. "Isn't that right, Metal?"

At that point, the monitor went blank. Then it went to Cal in the dark alley, reading the note. *When the time comes, I'm coming back for you.*

Metal blinked, before he shut the monitor off. *Oh, that clever bitch...* he thought, as he rubbed his head. *I knew it. She did want me to release Novagod... I suppose I'll have to thank Jill's mother when I get the chance.* Then, he stood up from his seat, before cracking his neck. *But at least Deity is stuck on* Angel Island *. Now, if she plans to have him kill Jill...*

Then, he let out a sigh. "Sonic, I don't know if you're watching me... but I permit you to laugh." Then, he pressed his finger against his ear. *"Calculate, I'll be leaving for a while, so just to be safe, I'm placing the facilities in this city under lockdown. You can go on a brief vacation."*

"...Uh, okay?" was Cal's response, questioning as ever.

"I have affairs to tend to." Metal continued. *"And with the situation as it is, I don't want to take any risks, so... I don't know. Why don't you head north for awhile? Take your mind off things."* As he spoke, he began leaving the building. *"And don't ask where I'm going; that is none of your business, Calculate."*

"...alright, if you say so," Cal replied.

"I doubt that I'll be gone for more than a few days, though. But be a good boy, nonetheless." Metal finished, just as he flew out of the tower, out of Westopolis. As he did that, every room in the entire city that was linked to his facilities immediately shut down and was locked, leaving no way of entering them. *Alright, Jillian...* he thought, as he folded his arms. *...I hope you're prepared.*

Boomer's eyes cracked open just a little, before they closed again. She put her hand on her wound to discover that it was bandaged, and her eyes popped open in surprise. She didn't remember the time they were bandaging her up; she had passed out due to blood

loss. So she tried to sit up.

"Wo- hey, be careful!" she heard someone say, as Newt was sitting by her, with a worried look. "You took a nasty blow, y'know. You should try and relax, Boomer..."

Boomer felt the strain of her wound and fell back on the bed. "… Newt?" she uttered, turning to the salamander. "What happened?"

"We got the lowdown from the others." Newt said, as he briefly glanced towards the other side of the room, where Whisker was sleeping, for some reason. "You got stabbed by that monkey, and the others got you back as quick as they could. Jill healed the really bad stuff, but..." Then, he looked back at Boomer. "...you still needed some bandages, y'know."

Boomer clenched her teeth and growled. "…that little weasel, Cal." Then she winced, feeling a jolt of pain from her wound.

"H-hey, don't strain yourself, alright?" Newt said, as he gently placed his hand on her. "It could get worse, y'know. Maybe you should stay in bed for a little while..."

Boomer let out a deep breath, "It's not like I'm going anywhere anyway…" She peered down at his hand, and then looked up at him. "…How long were you here?" she asked.

"Oh? Um..." Newt began, as he scratched the back of his neck bashfully. "...ever since we got you in bed, y'know." he admitted sheepishly.

"Really?" Boomer muttered. "You…stayed here all that time?" She blushed, while shyly looking away. "Were you really that worried?"

"Y-yeah..." Newt said with a nod, as he looked away as well, blushing a bit. "I was... worried that you wouldn't wake up, y'know. I know you're tough, but... for a moment, I really thought you were..." He couldn't even bring himself to finish that thought, let alone finish the sentence.

Boomer looked back at Newt, and then put her hand on his. "Thank you," she said, "for staying with me."

Upon hearing that, Newt looked back at Boomer, before smiling shyly. "Um... you're welcome." he said, as he found himself looking into Boomer's eyes.

Boomer looked back at his eyes, and it was silent just that moment…

…until the door opened. Boomer flinched, taking her hand off Newt's and turning away to see who was at the door. As it turned out, it was Charmy and Tails.

"You're awake!" Charmy said, in surprise and relief. "Don't scare me like that again, please."

"Good to see you up." Tails noted, as he looked at Newt. "Is everything alright? You look a bit flushed, Newt."

"Oh, um..." Newt muttered, as he scratched the back of his head. "I-I'm fine, really..."

Charmy kept in a chuckle; he knew what that was all about, and he was secretly glad that his plan had worked after all. "Anyhow, it seems that Jill is at top health again, so she can heal the rest of your —"

"No," Boomer interrupted, which surprised Charmy.

"What?" Charmy asked.

"I appreciate it, and I even thank Jill for saving my life," Boomer replied, looking at Charmy, "but she needs to save her energy for her duties. Besides, I can take a little pain…and to be honest, I'm not really needed much."

"Really..." Tails mused, as he folded his arms. "You'll be alright, then?"

"O-of course she'll be, y'know!" Newt said, as he gave Charmy and Tails a nod. "Ain't that right, Boomer?" he added, as he looked down at the duck.

"Yeah, I'll be alright Captain," Boomer said. Then she glared, "and

what the hell is that smirk about?"

"Oh, nothing Boomer," Charmy replied, without his smirk fading from Newt's reaction. Then he turned and walked away, chuckling. "Nothing at all."

Boomer raised an eyebrow. *Gee, I wonder if he had anything to do with the things that were happening to me and Newt,* she thought sarcastically.

Noting Charmy's chuckling, Tails raised an eyebrow, but he chose not to dwell on it too much. "In any case, Boomer, don't strain yourself too much, now." he said, before he followed Charmy out of the room.

"...I wonder what the captain found so funny, y'know," Newt mused, before he looked down at Boomer again. "Got any idea on what it was?"

"He's sometimes up to no good," Boomer replied, "such as messing with unsuspecting people. I think he's had something to do with all the weird things that were happening to us…"

"Really?" Newt muttered, as he folded his arms, just as he found himself looking at Boomer's eyes again. "...I suppose that explains that paint can..."

"…and the shelf," Boomer added, looking back at Newt's eyes.

"Heh... it was kinda funny, when you think about it..." Newt muttered, as he found himself entranced by Boomer's eyes; he just couldn't look away.

Boomer chuckled, "…I must admit, it is kinda funny…" She sat up slowly enough not to evoke any pain from her wound, without looking away from Newt either. While looking at him, she felt something strange, which she couldn't determine what.

Somehow, Newt felt the same, as he carefully lifted his hand up to Boomer's cheek, stroking it gently. "...you're..." he began, though he couldn't get the rest of the words he wanted to say out.

Boomer nearly held her breath. What was happening was such a sensation she never felt, that she wasn't sure what to do; and she still didn't look away from Newt.

Eventually, Newt managed to find the courage to utter the words he couldn't get out. "...you're beautiful, Boomer." he finally said.

Boomer cracked a small smile. "You…really think so?" she uttered, moving closer.

"Yeah... I really do." Newt said with a nod, as he found himself leaning closer to Boomer as well.

Boomer started getting shaky, knowing what might happen next, but she kept going to the point where she closed her eyes.

"WAH!" The sudden sound of someone sounding very shocked, however, managed to utterly ruin the moment, as Whisker had suddenly waken up, seeing this transpire before him. "Arr... sorry if I interrupted anythin'..." the pirate robot muttered, as he scratched his head.

"Whisker?!" Boomer was so surprised that she actually fell off the bed, and the pain from her wound kicked in as she cringed.

"Boomer!" both Newt and Whisker yelled in perfect tandem, as the two quickly got up to get Boomer up safely, but Newt was quicker, carefully picking her up from the floor. "A-are ya alright?" he asked.

"I-I be sorry!" Whisker said apologetically. "I didna mean t'..." At a loss for words, however, he began moving towards the door. "...I`ll jus' help myself ou' o' here..." he said, before leaving the room.

"It's a-alright. I was just surprised is all..." Boomer said.

"If you say so..." Newt nodded, as he placed Boomer back in her bed, before sighing in relief. "That gave me a start, y'know..."

Boomer was blushing in embarrassment now for what just happened. She had completely forgotten that Whisker was there, and she felt somewhat humiliated allowing herself to loose her guard like that.

"Um..." Newt began, as he scratched the back of his head, looking at Boomer. "You... you alright?"

"…I'm fine," she finally answered softly, looking back up at him.

"That's, um..." Newt began, as he sat down by Boomer, keeping his eyes locked on her. "...that's great, y'know. Great that you're alright..."

Boomer's mind was blank, not knowing what to say. The awkward silence just made her more anxious as she continued to look at Newt. Then she rubbed her arms nervously. *I can't believe this is happening,* she thought. *I never thought I'd actually feel this way about a guy…*

While the awkward silence made Boomer feel anxious, it made Newt feel absolutely lost, as he could only look at the duck. *Geez, never had this happen to me before...* he thought, scratching the back of his neck.

"…Newt?" Boomer finally said, wanting to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Y-yeah?" Newt replied, as he looked back at Boomer. "What is it, Boomer?"

Now her heart started to beat more rapidly for what she was about to say. "…I think I have feelings for you," she uttered.

"Y-you do?" Newt uttered, as he cautiously placed his hand on Boomer's hand. "Because... y'know, I was thinking that I have feelings for you, too."

Boomer quickly glanced at their hands, and back at him, and then she smiled.

Upon seeing her smile, Newt couldn't help but smile back, as he found himself slowly leaning towards Boomer again.

Thankfully, there were no interruptions this time, allowing their lips to meet and finally kiss. With this happening, Boomer touched Newt's arm gently. As she did that, Newt moved his free arm to Boomer's

other arm, touching it as gently, if not a bit more. Boomer didn't know how to control the feelings that were coming over her, wrapping her arms around Newt to bring herself closer to him as they made-out. Newt, too, didn't know how to control these emotions rushing through him, as he wrapped his own arms around the duck, gently caressing the back of her head. Boomer's heart was pounding so hard, she was almost afraid it could be heard, but she wouldn't dare ease up as the moment grew more intense—

--but another sharp pain struck her wound, causing her to recoil quite quickly as she clenched her teeth.

Her recoiling startled Newt, who looked at her with a surprised look. "B-Boomer?" he said worriedly. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"…I-it's just…" she uttered, holding her wound. "…I think I need to lie down again. It still hurts…"

"...ooh..." Newt said, as he nodded; he had been too caught up in the moment to think about Boomer's current state of health. "Um... if I was too rough, y'know..." he began, as he scratched his neck again. "...maybe we should... take it easy for now..."

"Don't worry, it wasn't you," Boomer said. "…but maybe you're right…"

"Yeah... you rest up, and things'll work out from there y'know..." Newt said with a nod. Truthfully, he really didn't want that moment to end as abruptly as it did. "...um, do you... want me to stay here, or...?"

Once Boomer lay back down on her bed, she let out a deep breath to relax. Then she turned to Newt. "You can stay if you want," she said, while personally, she really did want him to stay.

Newt nodded, as he sat back in his chair. "...then I'll stay here." he said.

Hearing his answer, Boomer smiled at him.

Brick and Jill left the basement after their own moment, walking down the hall when she encountered Charmy and Tails. Then they

were notified that Boomer was alright, and her response for Jill to heal the rest of her injury.

Brick just chuckled, "Same old Boomer; acting tough."

"So she just wants to let it heal by itself huh?" Jill said, and then she nodded. "Well, alright. I still would've been willing to heal it completely, but at least I'm glad she's okay."

"So are we." Tails agreed, as he couldn't help but smile.

"She's awake, huh?" Right at that, Natal walked down the hall, giving the four a nod, as she stopped between the two. "Well, I kinda knew already; Whisker had gone out of the room not too long ago, and... for some reason, he seemed really flustered." she said with a shrug.

At first, the group just looked at her silently. Apparently, the fact that Natal said more than two words hadn't quite sunk in yet.

Then Charmy grinned, "Oh really? What was Whisker so flustered about; did he say?"

"Nope; he was too flustered to say anything other than 'Boomer's up'." Natal said, as she rubbed her neck. "But if it's enough to render someone like Whisker flustered, it's gotta be big."

"He was that concerned after all." Ray passed by, and threw in his own remark when he stopped next to them. "That robot was watching her like a hawk; I'm sure he was surprised enough when she awoke."

"Probably," Brick muttered.

"Hm." Natal shrugged, as she sighed, before she closed her eyes. "Sheesh... I'm starting to grow worried. Ever since Wiper got back from being out in the woods, he's locked himself in his room, and hasn't opened it yet."

"Really?" Brick said, raising his eye brow. "Did something happen with him and his group of friends?"

"I dunno." Natal replied, as she looked up at the ceiling. "As I said, he's practically locked himself in his room, and I can't get him to come out." Then, she looked at Brick. "Whenever he just closes himself off, though, he does some serious thinking."

Jill wondered what could've possibly happened. She was more aware of their history than, say, Brick, Charmy and even her own father, (whom she never told at all about the history of the former GUN agents). Thinking about that, Jill turned around and started walking off.

"Brownie, where are you going?" Brick asked.

"I'm going to check on him," Jill said, passing a corner and disappearing.

With that, Ray glanced at Brick. "…Brownie?" he said. "That a nickname you gave her?"

"Uh, yeah…" Brick replied.

"Why do you call her that?" Ray asked, tilting his head curiously.

"…well," Brick uttered, scratching his head. He was going to regret saying this; especially to her father. "…she's brown, but mostly, she's sweet…like chocolate brownies." He admitted.

"...brownies, huh..." Natal mused, before she eventually smirked a bit. "Suppose it fits better than just something like... Choco."

Ray just laughed. "Oh, that's right. You're interested in my daughter." He set a hand on Brick's shoulder as he brought him down the hall. "We should chat a bit; get to know one another."

"…uh," Brick couldn't help but be nervous. The kind of father he only knew of would be the kind to beat the living daylights out of the guy if he even looked at his girl funny. Hopefully, Jill's father wasn't that kind of dad…

Watching Ray lead Brick down the hall, Natal couldn't help but giggle a bit. *Things around here are bound to become more interesting...* she thought.

Aside from one solitary candle, Wiper's room was completely covered in darkness, as Wiper was sitting on his bed, gaze directed straight ahead, and his mind on quite a few things. *...he wants my answer by night-time...* he thought.

A gentle knock sounded at the door, hoping not to interrupt his dark tranquility. "…Wiper?" uttered a voice. "It's Jill."

Glancing at the door, Wiper hissed. "Don't disturb me." he said bluntly, before he looked away from the door. "I'm thinking."

Outside the door, Jill stood there. She didn't say anything at first, but she didn't want to leave it at that…

"Thinking about what?" she asked.

"Everything, really." Wiper replied, though he didn't move one inch from where he sat. "Ironically enough, it helps me get my mind off things."

"Hm…" Jill muttered. "…may I come in?"

There was a bit of silence, at first. However, soon enough, the sound of the door unlocking was heard. "Close the door when you enter." she would hear Wiper say.

Opening the door, Jill was surprised how dark it was, but it didn't affect her a great deal. With good care, she closed the door behind her like Wiper requested, looking at the lone lit candle in the room silently.

"...so." Wiper said, as he still sat on the bed, looking at the wall thoughtfully. "What is it?"

"I wanted to check up on you," Jill said in a low voice. "I heard you locked yourself up in your room after visiting with King and the others. Did something happen?"

"Nothing of significance." Wiper shrugged; a blatant lie, but he did a good job at covering that up. "We exchanged some words, and...

well, that's all that happened."

Jill wasn't sure if that was the case or not; it didn't seem that way to her. She knew the way Wiper was though. "…Wiper, you do know that you can tell me anything, right?" she said.

Wiper merely glanced at her, before he looked back at the wall. "...King and the others are leaving tomorrow morning."

"…and you're thinking about whether or not to go with them?" Jill supposed. She wanted to know why they were leaving, but Jill didn't want to push Wiper too much.

"...not really." Another lie. Wiper, while having told King that he wouldn't have anything to do with his project numerous times, still felt somewhat responsible for their safety; especially since GUN would now be hunting them. "I'm just... contemplating on whether or not to say goodbye."

"I guess that means that Hunter might take it really hard," Jill said. "…if it means that he can't be with Ani."

"Yeah..." Wiper said with a nod, before he looked away. "...was there anything else?"

Jill glanced at his wound on his abdomen. The Corruption still hadn't taken affect yet, but while looking at it, she grew concerned. "…well, I just hope you don't end up going with them," she said. "If you do, it might just get harder and harder…and if the Corruption attacks you when I'm not there to get rid of it…" Jill couldn't finish. Having seen it happen before, she didn't want to tread across her traumatizing memories, and she shuddered when she thought about it.

When she said that, Wiper placed a hand over the wound. "Relax; I won't do anything reckless." he said, as he glanced at her. "And I've been doing great so far, haven't I?"

"Well, even if the Corruption is triggered by stress," Jill said, looking back at him. "…there's a time limit as well, Wiper."

"Well, mine seems to be a fairly lengthy one." Wiper said, before he hissed. "I've been carrying this for, what, a week, now? Apart from

one android punching me there, it hasn't done any significant damage."

"...I've seen someone who went for a month, Wiper," Jill said, "and in the end, they still suffered." Jill turned away to the wall, shuddering greatly. "...please Wiper," she said. "I don't want it to happen to you."

"...I promise." Wiper said, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. "I promise not to lose myself to this... so don't worry."

"...but if you go, then how will I know when you're in trouble?" Jill replied, without looking back at him.

"I'll give you a call." Just as he said that, he placed something on Jill's lap; a communicator. "If I happen to go, and if I feel that something might happen to me... I'll call you."

Jill picked up the communicator looking at it, and then she looked at Wiper. "...I need you to keep me informed of what's going on, so that I can detect the signs ahead of time," she said.

"I will." Wiper said with a nod, as he looked up at the ceiling. "But remember; I said if. I've got an assignment here, so I doubt that I'll be leaving the building any time soon."

"…well, if you do end up going," Jill said, as she headed toward the door, "I suspect this will be the last time I see you…so be careful."

"Yeah... sure." Wiper said with a nod, before glancing at Jill. "And... don't tell Newt or Natal about this conversation."

"Alright," Jill said, as she left out the door. Only a moment the light in the hall disrupted the quiet darkness of his room, but she closed the door behind her, it was dark again.

When she left, Wiper closed his eyes, before he hissed once more. *...hmph.* he thought, before he opened his eyes, glancing towards the door. *I was sent here to look after her... and our roles are reversed.* As he thought, he went off his bed, before moving to the door to lock it. *...I won't go with King and the others, but...* he thought, before he locked the door. *...I don't think I'll stay, either.*

Chapter 29

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As Jill walked away from Wiper's room, all of a sudden, Tails Doll fluttered to her. " *Hi, Jill! Do you wanna play?* "

"Huh?" Tails Doll had caught Jill off guard. "Oh, maybe—"

"NO!!! YOU'RE LYING!!!!!"

And that scream startled Jill all the more, turning in the direction it came from. "…Ani?!" she uttered.

Hearing that scream, Tails Doll quickly hid behind Jill, shaking a bit. " *That was scary... scarier than one of Big Bro's tantrums...* " he uttered.

Jill ran down the hall in alarm, wondering what the commotion was. Finally at some point, she stopped in a room with Ani stepping away from Hunter; in angry tears no less. Others like Tails and the kids were present in the room as well.

"I'm not lying Ani," Hunter said; though his ears were drooped sadly.

"If that's true, then WHERE WERE YOU?!" Ani screamed, as if that statement didn't help at all. "WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I NEEDED YOU?!"

"Ani, please calm down!!!" Milo pleaded.

"HOW CAN I CALM DOWN?!" Ani screamed again, causing Milo to cower behind Tails. "I thought all this time that both my parents were dead!!!" Then she turned at Hunter. "Do you even know what I went through?!?!"

"Ani, please…" Hunter said, sounding even sadder for some reason.

"No!" Ani yelled, shaking her head. "You left me when I needed you!!! SO I WANT YOU TO GO AWAY!!!"

"Ani..." Jack uttered, as he looked between her and Hunter. Even he knew that he shouldn't try to break up this conversation, since he could make the situation worse than it already was.

Tails, on the other hand, didn't say anything, as he only looked at Ani with a sad look. *Poor girl... she doesn't know what's been holding him from her...*

"Ani!" Jill said, finally cutting in. She could only guess that Hunter finally told Ani he was her father, and the news was taken the wrong way.

But Ani ignored her. She only glared furiously at Hunter, while tears continued to ooze out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

Hunter tried to approach her, "Ani—"

"DIDN'T YOU HEAR ME?!" Ani screamed, shutting her eyes. "I WANTED YOU-" telekinetic energy began to appear around her, "-TO GO-" and now she was directing it at Hunter, "-AWAY!!!"

"NO!" Jill screamed, jumping in front of Hunter in the nick of time to take the wave of energy that Ani shot, protecting Hunter. With the tremendous force shot at her, she was blown back and slammed into the wall, having the wind knocked out of her.

"JILL!!!" Striker cried, running over to the ewe doubled over in pain.

"JILL!" As did Jack, who quickly rushed to the ewe's side. "Are you alright?"

Ani was absolutely horrified at what happened. "Jill! Oh my god! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to!!!" she whimpered, as the energy died out around her.

Hunter, in the meantime, only glanced at Jill sorrowfully. And then at Ani. He tried to hide the fact that he was ready to cry himself, which only hardened him even more. "…Alright," he uttered. "…I'll go away Ani."

With that, Ani watched as Hunter walked out of the room silently. But right now, she was more concerned about Jill as she ran up to her.

"I'm so sorry Jill!" she cried, the tears continuing. "I didn't mean to! I swear! I was just—"

"—Ani, it's fine," Jill grunted, as she tried to get up.

"No! It's not fine!" Ani continued to weep. "I hurt you!"

"Y-you didn't mean to, Ani!" Jack said reassuringly, as he looked at her. "She's gonna be fine, Ani, so don't worry about it!"

"But…but it's…" Ani just broke down crying.

Was the news really that much for her to take? Jill wondered in thought, finally getting back up to her feet.

"Ani?" Striker said, touching her shoulder.

Ani just kept crying, not responding to Striker at all. It was then that the bear started to hug the little husky-wolf, and she cried into his shoulder.

Jack didn't say anything, as he couldn't help but rub his arm, looking at the crying girl with a sad look.

The kids decided to lead Ani aware elsewhere, and Jill walked up to Tails. "Did Hunter tell Ani that…?" Jill couldn't exactly finish since the blow was a bit more than she expected, but she figured that Tails would know what she meant.

"...he did." Tails nodded, as he let out a sigh. "And... well, you could see how she reacted." Then, he shook his head. "It's tragic, really..."

"Even with her past," Jill muttered. "…she didn't have to be so hard on Hunter." Jill was one of the only ones that knew that Ani had been used for her powers to do evil things before, and her psychological abuse was probably a key part in her hysteria.

"Hmm..." Tails nodded.

" *...poor girl.* " Tails Doll sighed, as he planted himself on Jill's head, looking down at her. " *I don't know if this is the right time, but... Jill, can you come outside with me? It's kind of important...* "

Jill peered up at Tails Doll. "Yeah, sure," she said, as she went ahead and walked down the hall to go outside. Then she noticed how casual she was about it. *Tails Doll brought Metal into the HQ, and I'm following the doll without question?* She wondered in thought. Well, she had to admit that following the doll never really brought any harm to her…yet.

When she got outside, however, Tails Doll was quick to start fluttering off her head, looking towards the woods. " *Hurry, Jill; it's really important!* " Then, before Jill could stop the plushie, he flew right into the woods.

"What?!" Jill was a bit surprised by that, and purely by reaction did she dash after the doll into the woods.

As she ran, she would find that Tails Doll was flying towards some familiar territory; namely, when he stopped, they had actually gone to the spring Jill would spend time practicing by. " *Okay... we're here.* "

Jill looked around, definitely recognizing the place. She strangely started to relax while she was here, but she knew the reason for that. Having trained here, the Purity likely took an affect to the atmosphere, so even if Jill was suspicious about what the Tails Doll would want, she didn't feel a sense of alarm.

"So, what is it?" Jill asked leisurely.

" *Well...* " Tails Doll began.

" *Thank you; I'll take over now.* " At that point, something suddenly landed right in front of Jill, arms folded, and a pair of glowing, red eyes looking right at her. " *Jillian... we need to talk.* " Neo Metal Sonic said.

Most people would be shocked, but Jill remained relaxed. "Did something happen while you hid the emerald?" she asked, somewhat concerned about that matter despite how relaxed she was.

" *You could say something happened afterwards.* " Metal replied

bluntly, before he looked to his sides. " *...listen, I'm cutting right to the chase here; Callous intends to release Novagod.* "

"…huh." It was a very mild response, and while Jill probably wouldn't be surprised about that, she grew serious. "I thought Callous didn't want anything more than to get away from him," she said sternly.

" *I was under the same impression... but it seems that our little biker-friend has a plan.* " Metal responded, as he folded his arms. " *From what I understand, all she wants with him is to have him be 'able to kill you, while Callous is spared', before she and Calculate attempts to dispose of him.* "

"She and Cal?! How could the two of them team up?" Jill asked. "They didn't…rebel against you did they? Well, Callous obviously… but Cal?" That just didn't make sense AT ALL. Last she remembered, Cal obeyed Metal without an argument.

" *No, they haven't rebelled... yet.* " Metal said, as he closed his eyes. " *I have a fail-safe, in case Callous attempts something with him, but for now, he's safe... though when it comes to Callous, I doubt even he can hold his cool. Seriously, you do* NOT *want to know what I had to sit through to obtain this information...* "

"Knowing Callous, I probably really don't," Jill grumbled. Jill may not know at all what Callous did, but she didn't forget that Callous still possessed a part of her; and sometimes she could pretty much guess what she was up to. They really were like twins…

" *In any case, I decided to show up here to tell you that if things get too rough, you ought to be on your guard.* " Metal said, as he turned away from Jill. " *And... I suppose I came here to prepare you, as well.* "

Jill nodded in understanding. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

" *Well, I need to see what remnants of Eggman's empire I can use, in case things go horribly wrong.* " Metal shrugged, before he looked back at Jill. " *But first... I'm going to train you.* "

"You? Train me?" Jill asked curiously. "…you're not really enjoying this, are you?"

" *Gee, what tipped you off?* " Metal said in a heavily sarcastic tone, before he turned to face Jill again. " *I mean, it's not like I have to put off establishing myself as the ruler of the world, because I need to train the one person who is truly able of stopping me, all so she can do is help out in stopping a force that will seriously make ruling the world a chore.* " Then, he sighed. " *Feel free to mock me; I'm actually doing this without being told to.* "

"Nah, I'm not that kind of person," Jill said. "Someone else I know might do that, but I'm not them."

You're not talking about me, are ya? Snickered a different voice in her head.

After that video, who else would I point the finger at? Jill replied in her mind.

" *Anyway...* " Metal said, as he began cracking his knuckles. " *...I have no doubts that you're an excellent fighter; after all, I would have had the scars to prove it, were I not a machine.* " Then, he cracked his neck for good measure. " *However, from what I've been able to gather, your power is the strongest when your emotions are in flux, such as when you're angry. What I hope to accomplish with you, is that you can contain that phenomenal power, even when you're keeping your emotions in check.* "

While wondering how a robot can crack his knuckles and neck without joints to crack, Jill nodded. "I've been training myself, and that's what I've been trying to do," she said. "Do you have a plan to achieve that?"

" *Well, apart from practicing your sword-arm, I haven't gotten anything yet.* " Metal said with a shrug. " *But you can't exactly blame me; this Purity and Corruption business is hard to wrap your head around.* "

"Yeah, I guess that's not your fault," Jill said, looking around. "What I did was channel my energy…in fact; I can do things like walk on

water so far without anything disrupting my emotions."

" *Then I suppose we're going to have to take baby steps...* " Metal muttered, as his eyes quickly flashed. Suddenly, around the woods, liquid metal formed some form of wall that would block both entry and means of exiting the area. " *Just for safety measures; I don't exactly want anyone but you knowing that I'm here.* " Then, he allowed his right arm to morph into a blade, before stepping backwards, away from Jill. " *Now, come at me.* "

Without taking her eyes off of Metal, Jill held out her hand and after a flicker of light, she had her own sword. Then while taking it in both hands, she lunged at Metal like he instructed.

With a simple swing of his own arm, Metal blocked the strike from Jill's sword, before pushing her away from him. " *Again, but put more power behind your swing.* " he instructed.

Jill's hands clenched the sword firmly, and with a nod, she lunged again; this time, like he instructed, she used more might in the swing.

Again, raising his arm, Metal blocked the attack, but this time, one could see that he had to struggle to push Jill away, in contrast to when he simply pushed her away from him the last time. " *Better. But keep your guard up.* " As he said that, Metal suddenly rushed at her, swinging his blade-arm at Jill.

Jill ducked her head as reflex, and again, charged after Metal with her sword.

" *Better."* Metal noted, as he blocked the strike, just as his other arm turned into a blade. " *But keep your eyes open.* " he said, before swinging it at Jill.

Jill turned away one of the blades with hers, as she jumped away from the other one. Then she whirled around Metal and tried to strike him from the back.

Again, however, Metal simply raised one of his blade-arms, blocking Jill's attack. *"You have the technique, but you're still holding back."*

he said, just as he slashed at her again. *"Come on, give me all you got."*

Jill clenched the hilt of her sword again, as well as her teeth. She blocked both slashes with her sword this time, and then she did a powerful vertical slice; letting out a yell as a side affect of using all her might.

Having turned to fully face Jill, Metal was quick to cross his arms, letting the two blades to take the attack from Jill. But as he prepared to push her away, all of a sudden, his blades shattered from the force of the impact, leaving Metal without his arms. *"...impressive."* he noted.

Jill heaved for her breath. It was hard work, but she was amazed that she made Metal's blades shatter. She didn't let down her guard, however, looking to see if Metal would continue or call it quits.

"...I think we're done for today." Metal eventually said, as his arms were reformed, before the Metallix glanced down at his hands. *"But we're not done with the training just yet; we still need to see what your limitations are. For now, you can rest."* Then, the walls he had created around the woods sank into the ground. *"I'll expect you back here* same time tomorrow *, Jill."*

As the walls fell Jill let go of her sword, which departed in a flash of light. Then as a sign of politeness, she bowed. "I'll be here," she said.

"Very good." Metal said with a nod, before he sat down by the spring, looking at the water. *"And don't let anyone know that I'm here. I'd like for this to be our little secret, Jillian."* he said.

"I won't say a thing," she said, as she started to walk away. Then she stopped. "Oh, I've got a question," she said, glancing back at Metal. "I have to know Metal; where did you hide the black emerald?"

" *Angel Island.* " Metal responded almost instantly, without looking back at Jill. " *Someone told me that the energies of the Master*

Emerald would weaken Deity, should he manage to break loose. "

"Angel Island?!" Jill blurted. That sure was a funny coincidence, considering that Knuckles requested Jill to find the island. It was then that she realized things weren't just coincidence. *Is that what Knuckles meant by finding the answers to my questions?* Jill thought. Could Sonic and his friends possibly…have a way to fight Deity? Maybe even *defeat* him for good?!

Jill tried not to act too shocked, as she swallowed. "I see," she said. "Well…I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yes, I suppose so..." Metal nodded. *"...just remember; this is our little secret."*

"Come on, Jill! Let's go back home!" Tails Doll said, as he suddenly fluttered on top of Jill's head.

Jill smiled when she looked up at Tails Doll on her head. Strangely enough, she was starting to like the little doll. With one last glance at Metal, Jill turned and made her way through the forest and back to HQ.

"See you around, Big Bro!" Tails Doll called before Jill fully left the area, leaving Metal to sit by the spring on his own.

"...well, I hope you're happy, Sonic." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"I've sunk down to your level... so go on. Laugh out loud, so I can hear you from the* other side *. I fully endorse it now."*

Likely, the robot only heard utter silence at his end...

...but Sonic did hear him, and he was taking the advantage of it by laughing Jill's head off. Jill held her head, wondering what was so funny and hoping that he'd stop, because she was starting to get a headache again.

Jill knew that a few days was going to fly a lot quicker than it usually did...hopefully.

Ani had finished the last of her crying, and was sitting in her own room with the kids gathered around her, still in her depression. She was even clinging onto her stuffed wolf, Cocoa.

"So....he's your *dad* ?" Striker asked in disbelief.

The silent Ani nodded.

"Hm... who'd have thunk..." Jack muttered, as he looked at Ani with a sad look. He wanted to ask her if she would be alright, but he didn't want her to get any sadder than she already was.

Just out in the hall, Wiper had finally exited his own room, walking down the hall, when he stopped outside of Ani's door, overhearing the conversation. *...hm?* he thought.

"Well, Ani," Striker said, hoping to try and talk to her. "...maybe he's not bad? I mean, he had enough courage to come and tell you that..."

"After ten years, Striker?" Ani said, glaring angrily at him. "Really?"

Striker jumped. It was really hard talking to Ani, because when she wanted to be, she could be VERY moody. After seeing what she was going to do to Hunter, the bear wanted to stay in one piece. "...maybe something was keeping him from you," Striker supposed, eying Ani cautiously.

"What could keep a Dad from his kid?!" Ani asked, getting worse, which caused the other kids to back away in fear. "He'd be trying everything to get to me if he wanted me!"

"But what if he thought that you were dead?" Right after Ani had said that, Wiper had opened the door to her room, looking at the husky with a neutral glance.

"...thought she were...?" Jack uttered, as he looked at the cobra.

Striker secretly let out a relieved breath. He was glad that Wiper had the answers, or supposedly did by the looks of it. While Milo and Buddy hid behind him, since they were still somewhat afraid of Wiper, Ani shot Wiper a bewildered look.

"Why would he think I was dead, Wiper?" she questioned.

"...I suppose he didn't tell you how your mother died..." Wiper said with a sigh, before he took a seat. "In any case... 15 years ago, I became a friend of your father. Even though it wasn't by the friendliest circumstances, he, I, and the other five GUN agents got aquainted, and befriended each other. Five years after that, he fell in love with someone."

"...was it my mom he fell in love with?" Ani guessed. She had never been explained how her mother had died; all she had been told was that both parents mysteriously died, and that was what she believed all her life up until now. Ani likely directed all her attention to what Wiper was saying, while the others listened curiously as well.

"Yes." Wiper nodded. "And for a while, it seemed like things would work out between them... he even considered retiring, to spend time with her... and you."

"But..." Jack began, as he tilted his head. "...what happened?"

"...she was sick." Wiper muttered, as he placed a hand on his chest, covering his wound. "And it wasn't just a cold; it was a virus. Midnight honestly wanted to save her, and there was a chance that he could... but he was detained, and imprisoned for various reasons, before he could grab that chance. Our superiors had very strict regulations..."

Ani stared at Wiper's wound, or his hand covering the wound. Jill had previously told her before that Callous girl attacked him and gave him that scar. Thinking of that, Ani automatically fit the pieces together once she also remembered what Sage said, but she didn't want to confirm her suspicion yet; she knew that Wiper might have more to tell, and she didn't want to interrupt it.

"In any case, GUN made it impossible for Midnight to even visit the house of your mother; he was always kept busy with missions taking place far away from that place, and he was unable to both break out and convince his superiors to let him go there." Wiper continued, before he hissed.

"However, five months ago, he got an opportunity." Then, he closed his eyes. "King, sick of how we were being treated, planned a coup d'etat, and everyone in our group but me sided with him. But..." He hissed. He wasn't sure if he should tell Ani that Hunter was responsible for telling about King's plot. "...someone told on them, and they were forced to retreat. But he finally had the chance he needed; he could see if your mother was alright..."

Then, he sighed. "...but what he found, was her grave."

Silence was still the master in the room, as the kids turned to Ani. Hearing the news, she was guilty about what she did to Hunter, and she became even more depressed hearing more of the story.

"He was heartbroken, to say the least..." Wiper muttered, before he stood up again, looking at Ani. "Not only because he had lost his one true love... but because he thought that he lost you, too. All..." Then, he glanced down at his wound again. "...because of that virus."

"It was Corruption, wasn't it?" Ani guessed, which surprised the kids a great deal.

"...yeah." Wiper said with a nod, before he closed his eyes. "I'm not sure how it got to your mother... but it did."

Ani was thankful that Wiper had told her this, even if it was a tragic tale. While thinking about how sorry she was for how she talked to Hunter, she recalled something else. "Hunter said that him and his friends have to leave tomorrow," she said. "He didn't say why, but he said that he might not be back for awhile...are you going with them Wiper?" she asked, bringing the attention of the other kids toward Wiper as well. "Because if you are...I want you to tell him sorry for me..."

"...I think he'd appreciate it a bit more..." Wiper began, as he folded his arms, looking at Ani with a small smile. "...if you told him yourself. You've still got time before he leaves, right?"

"Hey, yeah!" Striker added, looking back at Ani. "You can do that, right Ani?"

"I...I don't know," she uttered. "I still feel awful about the things I said to him...and then accidentally hurting Jill because of it..."

"Even so..." Wiper said, as he gave Ani a nod. "He still thinks that you won't talk to him, right? Unless you go to him..."

"..." Ani didn't say anything, but she knew that if she wanted to do it, she'd have to do it soon; like, right now even. "...can you take me to him then, Wiper?" she asked, looking up at the cobra hopefully.

"...yeah, of course I can." Wiper nodded, as he turned towards the door, looking at Ani. "Just follow me."

Ani did so immediately, leaving the boys alone in the room. With that, Striker let out another sigh. "Good," he said. "I just hope that she isn't mad at her dad anymore..."

"I don't really think she is..." Jack mused, as he tapped his chin. "But I wonder what the two are going to talk about..."

"Gee, everyone seems to be so busy nowadays," Milo remarked, looking sad. "I'm starting to miss the Clubhouse, and the times we spent playing with Brick and Jill and the Professor..."

Striker shared the same feeling. "Yeah, I miss the Clubhouse too..." he muttered.

"...why can't we go back to the Clubhouse?" Jack asked, as he looked at the others. "We had to move out because Metal Sonic would supposedly try and target us for the emeralds... but he hasn't really been around lately, has he?"

"That's true," Striker agreed. "Maybe we can ask if we can move back. The Professor would be close to his shop, and he could stay with us in the Clubhouse to make sure we're okay."

"But what about Captain Charmy, and Rudy?" Milo asked. "Even Boomer?"

"We could still talk to them," Striker said. "We got that kind of technology in the Clubhouse, thanks to the Professor, and maybe we can get Proxy to come stay with us too."

Milo actually liked that idea, considering what he knew about Proxy that the others didn't. Then he looked over at Jack. "What do you think Jack? Wanna ask if we can go back to the Clubhouse?"

"...yeah, I think I do!" Jack said with a smile, as he gave the others a thumbs-up. "Let's go ask them as soon as possible!"

Milo and Striker perked up and smiled. "Yeah!" they both cheered, as they ran out the bedroom door to do just that.

And in the meantime, Jill entered into the building, realizing just how exhausted she was. Slumping onto a chair she found, she let out a deep sigh. It seems as the days pass, she has more and more secrets to keep. Now she was realizing just how hectic it would be to avoid the attention of her friends...

...part of her figured that she should just tell them, but there were a lot of risks in that.

"Are you okay, Jill?" Tails Doll asked, as he looked curiously at Jill. *"Did training get you tired?"*

"A little bit," Jill answered, peering up at the doll that sat on her head. Then she smiled, as Tails Doll was somehow comforting to her. "But don't worry, I'll last." It was then that the boys hurried by Jill, and the rush attracted her attention. "What's the hurry guys?" she asked.

"We're going to ask if we can go back to the Clubhouse!" Striker said.

"Yeah, it could work out, now that Metal isn't trying to attack us all the time!" Jack chimed in.

"You mean...moving back to the Clubhouse to stay at?" Jill rubbed her chin thoughtfully. It could go either way, but she wasn't sure about it. Like the kids, she too missed the Clubhouse. It seemed more like a home to her, compared to the Chaotix HQ, and she was sure that Captain Charmy and his Detective force could use a break from this whole 'world saving' business.

Then she thought of something else. With the technology that Tails

installed in the Clubhouse, it had a pretty good tracking system. Maybe she could look for Angel Island, if the Chaos Storm around it had anything to say about it.

"You know what?" she said, standing up. "I kind of like that idea too. Maybe we'll talk to the Professor," she said.

"Awesome! Let's go!" Jack said, as he began moving ahead of the others.

"...so we're going to a clubhouse?" Tails Doll asked curiously.

"Yeah, you'll like it a lot Tails Doll!" Striker said.

"Hey, you guys go on ahead, I've got something to do first," Jill said.

"Alright then," Striker said, pulling along Milo and Buddy with him, who still expressed fear of Tails Doll. Once they were gone, Jill looked around carefully to make sure that no one else was around to hear her, and then she looked up at Tails Doll.

"If we're moving, then you'll have to let your Big Brother know about it," she told Tails Doll.

"Big Bro?" Tails Doll inquired, as he tilted his head. *"But-"* At that point, the red gem on the doll's head suddenly blinked.

"Already heard it, Jill." Then, the doll suddenly began speaking in a different voice; Metal Sonic's voice. *"Are you sure about moving? I was getting acquainted with the spring."*

Jill thought that was pretty convenient, while at the same time, it kind of spooked her a little. "After exploring Mystic Ruins, I discovered an abandoned base deeper in the jungle; which I later found out was one of Eggman's old bases. You could probably hide out there," she suggested, looking around again to make sure that no one was nearby.

"...hmph. I'll still miss the spring." Tails Doll muttered, though Metal's voice escaping the cute plushie was very off-setting. *"If you are moving back, then make sure that it doesn't take too long; I can't*

keep training you indefinitely."

"Alright," Jill said, and then she let out a small chuckle. "Sorry about that spring."

"Eh, I'll manage." the doll shrugged. *"Now hurry along."*

At that point, Tails Doll shook his head, as the glow in its gem faded away. *"Ungh... Big* Bro *can do that..."* he said in his regular voice, before he looked at Jill. *"So what were we talking about?"*

Jill glanced around again cautiously. So far, there was still no one else around but her and Tails Doll. With that eased on her mind, Jill went down the hall. "We were talking about our Clubhouse," she told the doll. "It's like a giant tree house." Getting into another room, she saw the kids gathered around Tails, Cream and Charmy and they were all talking.

"So Professor, do you think we could go back to the Clubhouse?!" Striker asked excitedly.

"Yeah, we can go back to the clubhouse!" Jack added excitedly.

Tails couldn't help but simply look at the kids with some manner of surprise. "Hm. I do have to ask, since you just asked out of the blue; what got you kids interested in going back?"

Jill stepped in. "I think it's a good idea," she said. "With all the stuff you built into our Clubhouse, Professor, I figure we could be more prepared for the things to come. That, and you could be near your shop again." Then Jill turned to Charmy. "I think you and your crew may need some time to relax without all our business around here, Captain," she said to him.

"Don't worry, you're not a burden," Charmy assured. "I kind of like all the excitement myself!"

"Well, even if we'd like to experience the adventure," Cream added, "we're not as young as we used to be. I must admit that I end up quite exhausted when the day is done, and I don't even do half as much as the others here."

Tails was silent for a short while, as he contemplated this. "...well, I don't see a reason why we shouldn't go back, so... why not? It's been a while since I've been at the shop, anyway; it could probably use some cleaning up!"

The kids cheered happily. Jill smiled, figuring that the Clubhouse probably collected some dust needing to be cleaned to. Then it finally occurred to Jill that there was a missing child in the group. "Hey, where's Ani?"

The kids halted from their cheering and glanced at Jill. "She went with Wiper to go see Hunter," Striker said. "She was going to apologize for the way she acted, since Wiper told us the story and why Hunter couldn't be with her..."

Chapter 30

CHAPTER THIRTY

At this time, the cobra and husky themselves were on their way to camp that the former GUN agents stayed at. Ani felt really anxious at the moment; around her friends she was a crazed goofball, but around strangers...she was deathly shy. Some strangers were an exception, like Newt, but the GUN agents were not the same. That was another surprising thing about her; something that she shared with Hunter in fact, which Wiper could recognize.

Wiper seemed to notice Ani's anxiety, as he glanced down at her. "You alright?" he asked, slightly tilting his head.

Ani looked up at him quietly. She hadn't seen her Dad in a lifetime, and it was a bit much for the man to suddenly walk into her life. Aside from the nasty things she said earlier, she wasn't sure what to say. Knowing that Hunter would be gone from her life again, or so she thought, it was a strange but sad feeling. "...is he going to come back for me, Wiper?" she asked. Then she clarified, "When he leaves tomorrow morning...is he going to come back when he's done with whatever he needs to do?"

"...I don't think there would be another thing on his mind but that." Wiper replied, just as he looked up; he heard lively chatter, coming from a clearing. "There they are." he mused, as he stopped. "...go on, Ani. They won't harm you; Ripper might threaten you, but he's like that, so don't take it personally."

"...alone?" the little husky-wolf croaked. It was bad enough that she was shy, but going towards a depressed immortal, a maniacal...well, maniac, a Thundercat and "She-who-shows-no-mercy" did not help at all. Only Sage, Hunter and Wiper seemed the most normal out of the group...at least as far as she knew.

"Well..." Wiper muttered, as he scratched the back of his head. "...if I go in there, King's bound to pester me about whether or not I'm coming with them, and... well, not too sure if I'll go with them or not,

yet." Then, he placed a hand on Ani's shoulder. "Don't worry; they may seem loony, but they won't be any trouble at all."

Ani only hoped that Wiper was right, for she clutched to Cocoa for dear life and took a deep breath.

Then she marched toward the chatter slowly.

Giving Ani a brief nod, Wiper backed up a bit, making sure to see that she did meet the others.

As Ani approached the clearing, what she would see was King, in the middle of one of his stories, with Ripper and Miser actually laughing. Sage was also chuckling, but from the looks of it, neither Queen or Hunter were laughing. "And then, the guy just goes 'What a shock!', and then I go 'Yeah, tell that to the last few folks who made that joke'!"

"Kekekekeke! Those people never stopped at making cracks about our powers, did they?" Ripper cackled.

Hunter was likely too depressed to even bother listening to King's story, and no one had talked to him since.

Ani spotted out Hunter immediately in the group, and while she felt that guilt return about what she said to him, she was thankful that he was at least there. Ripper freaked her out to the max already, just by his insane cackle, which made her hesitate going forward. Finally, she stepped out towards them slowly, holding Cocoa closely.

"Phew... so, anyone have a request for a different story?" King asked, as he wiped his brow.

"Actually, I think that can wait." Sage said with a minor chuckle. "We just got some company." Before Ani would know it, she was slowly brought a bit in the air by some unseen force, brought towards the center of the camp, which led to the group looking curiously at Ani. "Now, why not introduce yourself?" Sage chuckled, as Ani was placed on the ground again.

If it was one thing she ABSOLUTELY hated, it was to be placed in the spotlight. Uncomfortable fright settled in as she refused to make

eye contact with anyone; staring at the ground instead. "...M-my name's Ani," she muttered, which jarred Hunter from his thoughts to look in shock; discovering that his daughter was here.

"...Ani?" Miser uttered, as she looked at Ani with widened eyes. "As in... Anistasia?" Quickly glancing from Ani to Hunter, she gasped. "Oh my... so you're..."

"She's what?" Queen asked, as she looked at Hunter with a raised eyebrow. "You know her, Midnight?"

Hunter remained silent, wondering why she came back after what she said to him. Ani finally had the courage to look up from the ground and lock a stare with her dad, but even then, the two of them remained without words.

"Hey. Midnight, I asked you a question." Queen said, as she folded her arms. "Are you going to answer, or-"

"Hunter." King eventually said, as he glanced at the wolf. "...do ya want us to leave for a while, or...?"

Hunter, noticing the discomfort in his daughter's eyes, finally turned to King and nodded. "I'd appreciate it," he said, which eased Ani just a bit.

"Right." King nodded, before he stood up. "You heard him, guys; let's take a stroll. It's our last chance to get to look around, anyway." As he began walking into the woods, Queen, Ripper, Miser and Sage followed, though Sage stayed behind just long enough to give Hunter a small nod before she left, leaving Hunter and Ani on their own.

And ever since the group left, the two just stared at each other stupidly, until Ani had the nerve to step forward. "...I didn't mean what I said," she said, "about you going away." Even her ears were drooped sadly, adding a value of innocent cuteness.

Hunter sighed. While just saying that didn't dismiss his depression from earlier, it warmed his heart. "Why did you change your mind?" he asked.

"Wiper told me why you weren't there for me," she said. "...and I'm sorry about Mom." Hearing herself say that was strange. She hadn't really thought much about her real Mom, even if she might have suffered the most throughout this ordeal.

"Why be sorry? It wasn't your fault," Hunter said. "It was mine for not trying to..." he just couldn't finish. He buried his face in his hand, trying to hide the fact he was ready to cry.

Ani noticed this, and walked even closer to the wolf. She even grew a little concerned. "What's wrong?" she asked. Then she was startled when Hunter reached over and hugged her.

"Ani, if I knew you were alive, I would've done everything in my power to find you," he muttered, trying to keep himself from sobbing on the poor girl.

Ani didn't normally like to be hugged, possessing an issue of personal space, but under the circumstances she didn't care. She reached and hugged Hunter back, firmly. "It's not your fault; you didn't know," she said, on the verge of tears herself. "I didn't know either, and I shouldn't have reacted like that!" She even dropped Cocoa on the ground during the moment, as Hunter held her tightly and cried.

As the two hugged, Wiper had been watching from a distance, and seeing this made him smile. *Hunter... Ani... best of luck to both of you.* he thought, as he turned away, walking silently off into the woods.

The sobs eventually died down and the two were reduced to just hugging. "I don't want you to leave," Ani admitted sadly. "Not when I just found you."

"I know," Hunter replied. "Believe me, I don't want to leave either...but if I don't, then you and your friends might get in bigger trouble than they can handle." Hunter used a thumb to wipe his daughter's teary eyes. "But I promise that I'll come back for you. Don't think for a second that I'd abandon you..."

"I believe you now...Dad."

That brought a smile to Hunter's face, as did Ani's, sharing another warm hug.

Hmm... Hunter's lucky. Wiper thought, as he walked aimlessly through the woods, without looking back. *He has a daughter; someone he can care for and protect... it's more than I can say for the others and myself.* As he walked, he stopped, leaning against a tree for a while. *But... I can't decide. Upholding my duty... or staying with my comrades?*

"There's the little snake in the grass." Wiper heard a voice that he probably wished he wouldn't hear again, as a certain female crossed his path; Callous.

Seeing her again surprised Wiper, but not to the point where he showed it. Scoffing, he looked at Callous. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Nothing really," Callous said. "Just passing in sheer boredom; figured I'd bug you a bit." Her eye turned to the wound on his abdomen, and she smirked. "That hasn't been taken care of yet? What has it been, a week?" She shook her head, tsking. "My, it sounds like you've been neglected. Poor thing."

"It hasn't been giving me any problems." Wiper retorted, as he kept a solid glare locked on Callous. "And I doubt that it will in the near future."

"You sure about that? Corruption can be unpredictable, as well as **deadly** if not treated," the ewe chuckled. "I think it's so cute that my little sister is playing nurse towards you."

"Hm." Wiper scoffed, as he closed his eyes. "If it does get worse, I'll at least have the decency to tell her beforehand." he said, before looking at Callous again. "So I don't think that the Corruption is going to be that much of a bother."

"I'm curious though, does it bother you so much that she cares about you?" Callous asked. "If you ask me, it always seems like she's the center of attention. She could just be using your condition

as an advantage to consume your attention as well. Then when the Corruption is healed, she could very well leave you behind and forget about you."

"...she can't leave me behind. Not until after three more weeks have gone by, at least." Wiper said with a shrug, as he looked back at Callous. "Mere words aren't going to turn me, Callous. You're going to have to try harder."

"No, I don't think you're that gullible," Callous remarked. "Just voicing my thoughts aloud is all..." Then she confronted Wiper, setting a hand on him and smirking all the more. "After all, I like you and I'd hate for something unfortunate to happen to you." Obviously it was a lie, seeing as Callous could actually care less for Cal as well as him.

"Like Corruption consuming me, for instance?" Wiper questioned cynically, glaring down at the ewe with an uninterested look. "Or I suppose that you don't find something like that unfortunate at all, huh?"

Callous raised her brows and whistled, raising her hands away from him. "You ought to warm up Wiper," she said. "You're too cold for your own good."

"I suppose that's what's keeping the Corruption from doing me in." Wiper shrugged, as he glanced at Callous. "It comes from being in an army of sorts. You'd learn a thing or two about self-control if you enlisted."

"No thanks, not my thing," Callous said, waving her hand carelessly. She even wondered what she was accomplishing by conversing with Wiper, but then she figured it didn't matter. "Unfortunately, Daddy didn't think very high of the military."

"Too bad for him, then." Wiper said, as he folded his arms, before looking at Callous. "But I have to ask; what exactly were you hoping to do with that black emerald he's sealed in? Free him?"

Before Wiper was aware of it, Callous suddenly put her hand on him again; but it seemed more like a grab...and to the wound on his

abdomen no less. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm going to do," she sneered, as Wiper felt something painful coursing through her hand.

Suddenly, Wiper's expression shifted from a neutral one, to one filled with sheer agony. "Kkh... wh-what are you..." he uttered, as he winced in pain, his breath growing briefer.

"Surely a soldier like you can take the pains in life, can't you?" Callous continued to sneer, laughing at the sheer expression that Wiper had. As she continued to laugh, black Corruption energy began to collect around his wound and stir.

"Ugh..." Gritting his teeth, Wiper struggled to keep himself from yelling out in pain. "This... this is nothing..." he muttered, though it wasn't more than a lie to keep himself focused. *Damn it... at this rate...* he thought, as he began trying to calm himself, though the results of that were subpar.

"Now what the hell do you think you're doing, Callous?"

Surprisingly enough, that was rather calm, but Callous still met with a fist in her face, being punched away from Wiper thankfully. The snake saw Hunter standing beside him, along with Ani glaring deathly again, but directing that glare at Callous this time.

"H...Hunter..." Wiper croaked, as he sank down, holding a hand against his wound. *Damn it... I-I should have been more...* he thought, as he winced in pain, before glancing at Callous.

Hunter turned to Ani. "Ani, I want you to take Wiper back to Jill. I'll handle Callous."

"Okay." No disobedience there. With Cocoa in her arms, Ani lifted Wiper up, and then herself, with her telekinetic powers.

Callous, catching a glimpse of Ani, smirked. "Hey Ani."

"Hm?" Ani didn't know that she shouldn't have turned to look at the ewe, because the last thing she saw was black Corruption striking her down, knocking Wiper back down on the ground thanks to the lack of concentration.

"ANI!!!" Hunter immediately freaked out, and instead of going to his daughter, he jumped on Callous and ceaselessly began punching her.

However, even as he fell to the ground again, Wiper managed to get on his feet again, watching Hunter beat down Callous. "...tsch..." he uttered, as he glanced at Ani. "...h-hang on..." he uttered, just as he took hold of her, before he began running through the woods, albeit weakly.

Hunter didn't notice Wiper carrying Ani away; he was so blind with rage that he could no longer stop himself from hitting Callous over and over and over again. Though at some point, Callous surprisingly grabbed both fists stopping him. Her face was a mess, but she still wasn't affected by the punches at all. "You know, I'm starting to get really sick of your temper," she grumbled.

Then she pulled him within the ground. The two were gone in a blink, and no one else was around to see it...

...Aside from a pair of red eyes, hidden in the dark of the woods. *Hrm... she should probably learn about this* . the stranger thought, before it disappeared.

"You know..." At the moment, King and the others were standing right in front of the HQ, with King observing it with great interest. "...I haven't been inside of this place before. Any of you been in there?" he asked, looking back at his crew.

"Can't say that I have." Sage shrugged, as she glanced at Queen, Ripper and Miser. "And neither have they." As she glanced at Ripper, however, she raised an eyebrow. *Something's wrong... there's more than one again...*

" Oh, hi guys. What brings you here?" Jill had spotted them right there the moment she walked out the door, and closing it behind her, she walked up to them. Tails Doll was still perched on her head; Jill had decided that she took a real liking to it, or him.

"Oh, um..." King began, as he scratched the back of his head. "Well, Hunter's kid showed up, and they wanted some time alone, so I

figured we'd let them have some alone time."

"But we've been gone for some time, now, so..." Queen shot in, as she folded her arms. "...maybe it's time we headed back?"

At that point, Tails Doll's gem suddenly flared up, as the doll looked down at Jill. *"...I'm afraid I have some very bad news."* it said, though its voice was Metal's.

Jill was very startled, and now she was afraid; not because it was Metal, but he had tuned in... *right in front of the former GUN agents!* She hoped that her reaction would be interpreted as dumbfounded that Metal could do that trick, rather than having been found out. "...w-what?" she questioned, looking up at the doll.

"Well, first off... I spotted Callous in the woods." the doll said.

"Callous?!" Miser uttered, as she looked at the doll in disbelief. "That witch is here?!"

"Second... she dragged the one you call Hunter into darkness."

"WHAT?!" Both King and Sage proclaimed, both of them looking not only shocked, but angered as well. "What the hell does that bitch think she's doing to my comrades?!" King yelled.

"And third... well, you'd all do best to look behind you."

As he said that, the agents turned around, to see a startling sight; Wiper, who looked like he had been through hell, holding Ani in his arms, and what was worse, his wound seemed to be acting up. "...Dawn?" Queen uttered, as she looked at Wiper with an honestly distraught look.

"...J-Jill..." Wiper coughed, as he stumbled towards the HQ, keeping the small husky in his arms. "Y-you have to... h-help... Ani..." Then, he suddenly collapsed though he still held Ani in his arms.

"Oh no!" Jill instantly forgot her fear about Metal, as it was replaced with the fear for the two of them. She didn't know who she was more concerned about as she knelt by them; while noticing Wiper's wound was significantly a **LOT** more worse, she also saw that Ani was

beaten up, as well as unhealthily pale, which looked almost like the same condition she, herself, was in when Proxy rescued her from 'the dark.'

"DAWN!!!" Without skipping a beat, all of the agents were quick to surround the snake, with Queen actually cradling him in her arms. "Dawn... Callous did this to you, didn't she?" she muttered, as she felt his pulse. "Tsch... he's holding on, but for how long?"

"Dawn..." King uttered, as he clenched his hands into fists, before he glared towards the woods. "...that bitch is gonna PAY!!!" Before anyone could stop him, electricity crackled all around him, as he ran towards the woods.

"Twilight, wait!" Miser called, as she looked from Wiper to King, before glancing towards Ripper. "Noon, you have to follow him! Make sure he doesn't get hurt!"

"Kekekeke... all right." Ripper nodded, as he ran after King, leaving the others to watch over Ani and Wiper.

"Tsch..." Sage closed her eyes, as she looked at Jill. "You can help them, can't you?" she asked.

"I...I don't know about Ani," Jill jittered. "But Wiper I can help." She rolled the snake over and pried Ani from his arms, giving her over to Miser. "Please, take her inside and let everyone know what's going on," she said.

"...alright." Miser nodded, as she swiftly ran into the HQ, Ani in her arms.

Wiper, on the other hand, seemed to only get worse, as he was breathing like he was about to hyperventilate. "Agh... hurts..." he uttered weakly.

"Stay strong, Dawn..." Queen muttered, as she closed her eyes.

While looking at the wound, Jill saw it began to ooze with black goo; a sign that Corruption indeed was taking an effect. She concentrated on coating both her hands with green Purity energy, making them seem like gloves. "Wiper," she muttered. "...this is going to hurt more

than you can imagine, but...I'll need to you keep relaxed."

Then she pressed her hands on it. While the process began, Jill winced; it hurt her too.

The moment she placed her hand on the wound, Wiper gritted his teeth, as an unimaginable amount of pain rushed through his entire body; it felt like sheer torture. Nonetheless, the snake began to calm down, taking deeper breaths, and making sure not to yell in pain.

Luckily remaining calm helped the process a tad, just so Jill didn't have to concentrate any harder than she had to, but that still didn't make it an easy task. A loud sizzle sounded, as the goo began to evaporate and deteriorate away. Soon, it was all gone, as well as the Purity around Jill's hands. Now there were burn marks on her hands, which the others noticed as she pulled her hands away.

"...Dawn?" Queen uttered, as she looked down at the snake, who was breathing heavily. "Are you-" Suddenly, Wiper wrapped his arms around the bear, as they actually heard him sob. "Dawn?"

"That..." Wiper wept. "It felt like... those days again..."

"...Wiper..." Sage uttered, as she looked down at Wiper. "...don't worry. It's over now. You're safe." she said soothingly, as she placed a hand on Wiper's shoulder.

"...someone as stoic as him, reduced to tears..." Tails Doll muttered, still with Metal's voice, before he glanced at Jill. *"There's still the matter of both Ani and Hunter... you should focus on Ani; I'll help out with Hunter."*

"How are you going to help him?" Jill asked, distressed. "He was dragged into..." she shuddered again to think about the very place that whispered many deaths...

"Hey, I happen to be in the neighborhood. You think I wouldn't at least try to locate him?" Tails Doll replied, as he closed his eyes. *"Alternatively, you could just get the* Shadow *Android that escaped to help out. What are you calling him now...* Proxy *, isn't it?"*

Overhearing their conversation, Sage glanced at the two. "You're

saying that you might have a way of finding Hunter?"

Jill looked at Sage nervously. "...well, Proxy did rescue me," she said. "He might be able to help Hunter as well." But Jill was still concerned about the fact that Metal was talking to her in front of them.

"Then go get him." Sage said, as she stood up, giving Jill a nod. "I'll survey the woods from up above; if either Callous or Hunter emerges from the dark, I can lock onto them right away." Then, she took to the skies.

"...Metal Sonic." Queen said when Sage was out of ear's reach, as the bear glared at the doll. "Why are you helping these people?"

"Because Queen," Jill answered instead, rising to her feet from where she knelt, "Callous wishes to release Deity Novagod from the black emerald."

"...Deity Novagod..." Queen muttered.

"Basically, some vampire who is more or less going to make the world a living hell *, unless we put a stop to what Callous is planning."* Tails Doll chimed in.

"Isn't that your intention, too?" Queen asked, as she raised an eyebrow.

"Hey, I only intend to take over the world, not turn every person into a glob of darkness." Tails Doll quipped back.

Then something occurred over Jill that was totally out of her character; she smirked. "Oh, you know, it's a matter of dominance. I'm sure he's always had that issue." Then the smirk was gone. What in the world was happening to her?

That prompted both Tails Doll and Queen to look at Jill with a perplexed look. "...right..." Queen muttered, before shaking her head. "In any case, the android you called Proxy... go get him. If we lose one of our comrades to Callous, I..."

"Don't worry; no one's going to die just yet." Tails Doll said, before tilting his head. *"And what will you do?"*

"...I... suppose I'll have to look after Dawn." Queen responded, looking down at Wiper, who was still holding onto her, sobbing. "He'll need someone by his side..."

Jill set a comforting hand on Wiper. "Take it easy," she muttered with a sigh of sympathy. Then she headed right into the HQ in a hurry; Tails Doll somehow still perched on her head. While running, she looked up at him. "If you still want to keep yourself a secret from my friends, then I suggest you aught to stop talking from Tails Doll so unexpectedly."

"Don't worry about that." Tails Doll replied, as it closed its eyes. *"Just find Proxy..."*

Then, it suddenly shook its head, looking around. *"Hrm... Big Bro says a lot of things..."*

Thinking back to when she acted out of her character, she realized that joke was totally irrelevant and in bad taste. Part of her wanted to forget she ever said such a thing, but at the same time, she wondered just what caused her to act so. Only a certain someone would make fun of Metal…

...No, that couldn't be.

It took Jill a minute to realize that she passed Proxy since she was lost in thought, and when she did, she spun around. "Proxy!"

Blinking, Proxy glanced behind him, looking at Jill. "What is it?" he asked.

"A lot of things suddenly went wrong," She began. "Did you see what happened to Ani?"

"Yeah... she looked terrible." Proxy nodded, as he folded his arms. "Everyone's busy trying to help her, but from the looks of it, they're going to need your help as well." Then, he raised an eyebrow. "But there's something you want to ask me, right?"

"Yes," Jill said. "Callous did that to Ani, but she also took Hunter. I need you to help King and Ripper get him back from her."

Proxy needed only a moment to process that, before he nodded. "I understand. I'll be back in a moment." Then, he quickly rushed towards the exit, warping out of sight before he exited the door.

"COME ON OUT, WILL YA?!" At the moment, King was rushing through the woods in a blind rage, sending blasts of electricity just about everywhere. "CALLOUS!!! COME OUT AND FACE ME, AND LET MY COMRADE GO!!!"

"King, slow down!" Ripper called from behind him, as he had some trouble keeping up with the tiger. "You can't just wreck the woods and hope to find her; you'll be drained! Kekekekeke!"

Although King couldn't hear because of his tantrum, Ripper could hear it. Whispers, which were echoing through the air; unnerving whispers…

Hearing those whispers, Ripper couldn't help but grin, as he began catching up with King, who had finally stopped running, to catch his breath.

"Man..." King uttered, just as he slammed his fist into a tree. "Where the hell could she be hiding?"

"In the dark." Suddenly, Proxy warped right next to King, which surprised the tiger considerably. "Stand back." Then, the android planted his hand into the ground, as dark energy began swirling around it.

"Keke?" Ripper mused, as he looked at the dark. "What's that?"

"...a gate." Proxy responded, as the darkness opened up, before Proxy began sinking into it. "I'll find Hunter, so don't worry."

"You mean, WE'LL find him!" King said, as he grabbed Ripper. "Come on!" Then, when Proxy had fully sunk into the dark portal, King leapt after him with Ripper in tow.

Entering into the dark was definitely easier this time for Proxy, but for first timers like King and Ripper, it had the side affect of slight nausea and dizziness.

At first, they were just standing there in the darkness, waiting silently…

…then came the sign they were hoping for.

"You certainly don't know when to quit, do you?"

"What do you think?! YOU HURT MY DAUGHTER!!!"

The voices sounded faint and distant, but they were still easily distinguished as Callous and Hunter exchanging an argument. Then there was a big **SLAP** that sounded.

"Quit crying like such a baby…"

"Ungh..." King moaned, as he held his head and stomach. "Sheesh... where-"

"Ssh!" Quickly shushing King, Proxy pointed straight ahead, towards the source of the noise. As he warped, King and Ripper ran in the direction the android had pointed them to.

Once close enough, they witnessed Callous delivering quite a kick to the wolf's face, knocking Hunter toward King and Ripper onto the dark ground. Snorting up snot and blood, Hunter peered up at the two of them. "…how did you two get here?"

"Oh great, company," groaned Callous, with her hands on her hips in disapproval.

"Callous..." King grunted, as he cracked his knuckles. "...you have some nerve. First you deceive Sunset, and now you torture Midnight?" Then, he growled, as electricity crackled around him. "I can't let that pass. Not by a long shot."

At that point, Proxy suddenly warped next to Hunter, glaring at Callous. *"I'll be taking him."* he said in that language again, before he and Hunter warped next to King and Ripper. "We got what we

wanted. Let's get out of here!"

"Not until I've taught Callous a lesson!" King yelled, as he prepared to lunge at the ewe, when Ripper suddenly blocked King with one of his blade-arms. "Noon?"

"Kekekekeke... you guys go on ahead." Ripper chuckled, as he glared at Callous. "I'll take care of her. Kekekekekeke..."

"...fine. But leave some for me." King grunted, as he glanced at Proxy. With a nod, the three ran towards the exit, leaving Ripper alone with Callous.

At Ripper, Callous just looked at him. "Well, you certainly are the crazy one in the group," she commented. However, she knew something was amiss with Ripper; and it happened to be involved with her *special* talents. Seeing this, she smirked.

"...kekekekeke... he certainly is." At that point, when Ripper opened his mouth, his voice sounded completely different, almost as if someone had distorted it with a voice modification program. "But it made the nuisances flee the scene... we are most pleased with that. Kekekekekeke..."

Callous just smirked all the more. "So I see," she said. "Do you *all* intend to kill me, or do you have other plans?"

"On the contrary, princess." Ripper uttered, as he began moving his blade-arms around erratically. "We have the same goal, after all... kekekekekeke..."

Callous liked the sound of that *"princes,"* although they were a bit vague when mentioning the "same goal." "And what goal would that be?" she asked.

"Is it not obvious?" Ripper chuckled, as the blade-arms began moving more and more erratically. "To free the Master."

"Good, then." Callous chuckled. "If you wish to come along then, I suggest you follow me." And without another word, she began walking away.

"...kekekekeke... the world will be engulfed in darkness..." Ripper uttered, as he followed Callous, without even a moment's hesitation.

Chapter 31

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jill entered into the room where everyone gathered around the pale, sleeping Ani. "How is she?" she asked worriedly.

"...she isn't getting any better." Miser said, as she had her arms folded. "I'm not sure what it is..."

"Jill..." Jack said, as he looked at Jill with sad eyes. "...you can help Ani... right?"

Jill just didn't know how to answer Jack, or the other children that directed sad and scared glances at her. Passing by everyone, she placed a hand on Ani's forehead. She was burning. All she could think was why? Why did Callous attack poor Ani?

Maybe it had something to do with what strange thing Jill sensed about Ani. If her mother was pregnant with her while being attacked by Corruption, what possible effect did it have on Ani? Now that she had come into contact with the dark energies, perhaps they would find out.

So far, it wasn't good.

For the sake of easing everyone's worry, Jill attempted to begin healing her with her hand on Ani's forehead illuminating white energy. Everyone watched in nervous anticipation.

The longer Jill tried to concentrate, the more she realized that nothing was happening. Ani remained as pale as ever, and she didn't wake. She tried even harder in denial, but soon the truth sank in. Jill pulled her hand away, shaking. "I…I can't h-heal her," she uttered in fear. "I don't even know wh-what's going on."

"Wh-what?" Jack uttered, as he looked at Jill in utter disbelief. "You... you don't mean that..." he uttered, as he began tearing up.

"..." Miser was silent, as she placed a hand on Ani's forehead. Then, her eyes suddenly widened. "...Sage." Then, she looked back at Jill. "It might be taking a huge risk... but Sage could delve into Anistasia's mind, and find out what's wrong."

"That might work," Jill said, trying to relax. Seeing the reaction from the children, she collected them together and hugged them all at once. "Don't worry guys," she said. "I promise that Ani isn't going to end up like Shadow…"

"Why?!" Striker sobbed on Jill's shoulder. "Why did Callous hurt her?!"

"Callous does a lot of things because she's really bad," Jill explained. Then she nodded to Miser, "if you can, hurry and go get her."

"I will." Miser nodded, as she hurried towards the door, but before she could open it, it opened on its own, with Sage standing in the doorway.

"...really?" Sage said, as she walked past Miser, standing next to Ani. "So, you need my help here... by the way, Jill, they got Hunter out. They're headed towards the HQ as we speak."

"Oh, thank goodness," Jill said, letting out a sigh of relief. "As you figured out, I can't heal her. There's something going on that I don't know…and I think it has to do with what happened when her mother--" then she remembered that she couldn't continue in front of the kids. Then again, she knew that Sage probably could figure that out too.

"I see..." Sage mused, before she moved her arms towards Ani's head. "I'll need some space. It'll help me focus a bit more." she added, before gently placing her hands against Ani's head. *Now, Ani... allow me passage into your mind!*

The command fell on deaf ears. Instead, Sage could hear a demented growl from inside her mind. *Go away…*

Her eyebrows furrowed, as Sage took a deep breath. *I'm sorry, but I*

have to come in. While everything seemed normal to the others, like when she had entered Jill's mind, Sage's surroundings shattered like glass, as she found herself in a white void. "Now... what ails you?"

In the white void, there was an area of darkness. The growling came from that darkness, refusing to reveal anything as it hid in it. "I'll tell you what ails me," the same voice grumbled; a voice that was quite grizzly and rough…

…yet, it sounded vaguely like Ani's voice.

"What ails me is that you're disturbing my peace," the voice spoke.

"Peace?" Sage inquired, as she raised an eyebrow. "Listen; darling... you'll be resting in peace, if I don't find out what Callous' attack did to you. Are you going to let your friends lose you? And your father, as well?"

"They're not going to lose me," the voice groaned. "In fact, Corruption doesn't have as bad an effect as some might think…"

"...I suppose you ought to tell your mother that, then." Sage said coldly, as she folded her arms. "Ani, everyone's worried about you... if you can tell me what happened when Callous struck you, we could find a way to help you out."

It was silent. That remark about her mother likely shut the voice up. "…she didn't do anything fatal," the voice said. "But because of what she did to me…they'll see who I really am."

"Who you really are...?" Sage inquired, as she raised an eyebrow. "Ani... why won't you step out of the dark? It won't do you any favors in the long run."

Silence, again. This time, the silence was finally interrupted by big, heavy steps. First, a large paw-like foot stepped out, then it grew into a tall body; much taller than Sage. Ragged fur had overgrown everywhere, especially the chest where a lot of it collected, and then beside the body hung two very large arms, with claw-like nails. Finally, a face was seen.

It was Ani, but she bore jagged, wild teeth, and her hair was a mess.

The moment she opened her eyes, Sage saw that they turned red, with black in the background. Her ears pointed up almost like devil horns.

She was a monster, to say the least.

After a glance at Sage once she had stepped out, she turned away in shame. "I had nightmares about this…but I never thought it would actually happen to me one day."

Sage looked at the monstrous form Ani had assumed with some surprise, but she hid her surprise well. "...so Corruption's turned you into that... but only on the inside." she noted. "But now I'm worried that you might turn into this on the outside, too... in any case, do you know if there's any cure for this?"

"No. I don't know the cure," Were-Ani spoke. "I don't even know that it's something that can be fixed…Jill's Purity isn't going to do anything by itself."

"Don't talk like there isn't a cure for it, Ani." Sage said, as she looked up at her. "Jill may not be able to cure it on her own... but if it's related to Corruption, we'll find some way to fix it, so don't worry your sweet head about it." Then, something dawned on her. "So... Ani, is there any way you can wake up, without turning into this form?"

"I don't know," Ani muttered, "but I'm afraid to."

"I see..." Sage mused, as she rubbed her chin. "...Ani, can you give me a few days?" she asked, as she looked back up at her. "I can put your subconscious to sleep for some days, which should keep you from potentially harming anyone. In that time, we'll try to find a way to help you out. Does that sound good to you?"

"…will it have any side-effects?" the were-husky-wolf questioned nervously. She glanced behind her to discover that she had three tails, strangely enough.

"Nothing major." Sage said reassuringly. "The only thing is that while you'll appear alive out there, there won't be any way of waking you,

until your subconscious awakens on its own, which takes a few days at least, or when I wake you up from in here. It's your decision, so there's no pressure..."

"…but won't I be like a zombie or somethin'?" Ani asked, scratching her furry chest with her nails.

"No, no, you'll just be asleep." Sage said with a friendly smile. "Think, um... Sleeping Beauty. With Callous as the witch, and me as the good fairy."

Ani just stared at her blankly. Then she broke out into hysterical laughter, with a snort or two for added measure. When it subsided, the creature wiped a tear or two away. "That's such a baby story," she said, "but I like that you make Callous the witch; she IS one anyway."

"A very naughty one, to boot." Sage nodded, as she couldn't help but chuckle a bit as well. "Regardless... shall I?"

"Sure," Ani said, "but before you do, I want to know; is my dad okay? All I remember is that he said he'd fight Callous while I tried to take Wiper back…"

Sage blinked, as she rubbed her chin. "...he's alright." she eventually said with a smile. "Callous tried roughing him up, but Proxy, King and Ripper pulled him out of it before things would get too ugly. So don't worry; he's perfectly fine."

"Okay, good," Ani uttered with a sigh. "Go ahead now; just remember to get Cocoa for me. I dropped her in your camp."

"Alright." With a nod, Sage began flying, as she looked intently at Ani's eyes. "Sweet dreams, Ani..." she said, as her eyes began glowing. Soon enough, the white void began distorting itself, and Ani would start feeling drowsy.

Ani did not fight the sleepiness, and she drifted off to a peaceful sleep.

On the outside in reality, Jill immediately noticed Ani's paleness fade away and restore her normal color. In hope, she looked at Sage.

At that point, Sage opened her eyes, and slowly moved her arms away from Ani, as she sighed in relief. "...she's alright." she said briefly.

The kids immediately rushed to Ani after they heard Sage. "Ani! Wake up!" called Striker.

"Ah, ah, ah..." Sage said, as she used her powers to move the kids away from Ani. "She may be alright, but she still needs her rest."

"Are you sure?" Jack asked, as he looked up at Sage. "Can't we ask Ani if she's-"

"No, she'll need some rest. Would you be kind enough to go outside? I need to talk with Jill about something," Sage said with a smile.

The kids looked inquiringly at Sage, and then back at Ani worriedly. For a minute they juggled looks between the two, until they eventually fled out the door; Striker hesitating with one last glance at Ani before he joined the rest. Then the door shut behind them.

Jill turned to Sage. "What was wrong?"

When the kids were gone, Sage's smile fell. "I have no idea how Corruption caused it... but Ani's subconscious has transformed. It's like some kind of werewolf... in any case, she agreed to let me put her subconscious to sleep, so we can focus on finding some way of helping her." Then she glanced at the sleeping husky. "The downside is, well... she can't be woken up by anyone but me, or herself."

"Werewolf?" That word jumped out at Jill for a strange reason; almost as if it sounded familiar to her, but she never even heard of an incident of Corruption involved with any werewolves. "Well, that's a first for me," she uttered, glancing over at the sleeping Ani. "But other then that, she's alright? The Corruption won't…harm her?"

"No..." Sage said, as she closed her eyes. "...but it doesn't mean that we can rest easy. I'm afraid that if her subconscious wakes up before we can find a cure... her body will turn into that werewolf

form. And while she acted like normal in her mind... in real life, I have my doubts."

"To think…" Jill muttered. Ani was a hyper little girl for sure, but even then, she was still too innocent to be seen as a raging beast. The news was likely unsettling, but Jill personally was relieved that it wasn't that bad.

After all, she imagined a much worse scenario.

Then something came to mind. "Sage, I have to ask," she said. "Does Hunter have any…you know… *similar* abilities?" Somehow, she felt like she hadn't explained that clear enough. "I mean…can Hunter become a werewolf too?"

Sage blinked, as she tapped her beak. "...now that you mention it... yes, he can." she said, as she looked down at Jill. "It's only happened a few times, though, when he's gotten himself exposed to the light of the full moon." Then, her eyes widened. "...so you're saying that..."

Jill knew she had hit the target. "It's possible Ani actually inherited the trait from Hunter, and because her mother was attacked by Corruption during her pregnancy, Corruption somehow triggered that trait inside Ani…" she explained. Then she rubbed her chin thoughtfully "…but I'm curious how Hunter got that way."

"...I don't know." Sage replied, as she leant against the wall. "All I know is that he's had it pretty much since I first met him, fifteen years ago..." Then, her head perked up. "Speaking of, they just got in... but Proxy and Ripper..."

Suddenly barging in the front door of the HQ was King, who held Hunter over his shoulder. "Don't worry, comrade; we're home free!"

As she had left Ani's room earlier, they immediately met with Miser, who was surprised at how sudden King's entry was. "You found him! But... where's Ripper?"

"He stayed behind. Proxy went back in to get Ripper out." King said,

as he glanced at Hunter. "Midnight. You alright?"

Hunter let out a pained moan. "Well, I got the snot beat out of me… but other then that; I couldn't really care as long as I'm still alive." He looked up at Miser with a black eye. "Is my daughter okay?" he asked.

"Sage is giving her a check-up." Miser said, as she scratched the back of her head. "But I don't know how progress is going; I left to help Queen get Wiper in a bed. He's still shaken up after Jill cured him..."

"Shaken up?" King inquired, before shaking his head. "Well, I suppose we'll have to wait, for the moment..."

"Can I see my daughter?" Hunter asked immediately; nothing else could be on his mind than his daughter. He looked up at Miser with hopeful eyes.

"I-I suppose..." Miser said, as she glanced behind her. "I think Sage should be done by now..."

"Then let's not hang around! Let's go see her!" And without delay, King ran down the hall, Hunter in tow, headed towards where he assumed Ani's bedroom would be.

King barging in certainly startled Jill, but seeing who it was, she relaxed. "Hunter, are you alright?" she asked, noticing his black eye with a slight wince.

"I'm fine," Hunter said, rolling his eyes as he pulled himself away from King. "I just want to make sure that Ani is oka--" he couldn't finish as he stumbled over, nearly falling onto the ground.

Though before he fell, Sage was quick to catch him. "She'll be alright. She's just sleeping, now." she said, as she helped Hunter on his feet. "But you, mister, are going to need some medical attention."

Hunter didn't care. He looked over at his sleeping daughter with relief, seeing that her condition was better than he had seen her before.

"Don't worry Hunter," Jill said. "As far as I'm concerned, she'll be better before you know it."

"...what about our plans for leaving in the morning?" Hunter said, which caused the room to fall silent.

"...looks like we'll have to stay a bit longer." King said, as he closed his eyes. "Damn... well, they'll likely only send troopers and choppers; nothing me, Sage and Queen can't handle."

"Yeah..." Sage nodded, when she glanced at King. "So, how long has Ripper been gone?"

"He insisted on staying behind to fight Callous." King responded. "Proxy went to fetch him... but he hasn't come back yet."

At that point, they could hear the front door being closed. "Ah, that's him." Sage said, as she and King headed out.

Seeing them leave, Jill helped Hunter over to the bed that Ani slept on. "Stay here," she instructed, as Jill ran out following King and Sage to see what was going on.

In the meantime, Hunter looked over and stroked his daughter's hair, careful not to wake her. He didn't know that Sage put her subconscious to sleep, but he knew his daughter needed rest. He was just glad that she was alive.

When Jill entered the main hall, she'd see that King, Miser, Sage and Queen were there, looking at Proxy with interest, as the android looked down at the floor. "...well?" King uttered. "Where's Noon?"

"...I... I'm sorry." Proxy said, in a somber tone.

"Sorry? For what?" Queen inquired.

"...I searched everywhere, but... there was absolutely no sign of Ripper." Proxy said, and this made the agents stunned, to say the least. "I couldn't find him..."

"...no..." Miser uttered, as she backed away from Proxy. "D-don't tell me that..."

"You're kidding." King said, as he looked at Proxy with a devastated expression, before placing his hands on the android's shoulders. "You're just pulling our legs, right? Noon... he can't be dead! He just can't! Where is he?!"

"I don't know!" Proxy suddenly yelled, which made King back off. "I... I just don't know..."

Jill felt afraid now. Callous gambled with lives, even just played with them. As far as she's observed of Ripper though, she knew that the mantis would've had given up so easily; despite how cruel Callous battled. Even then, Callous could rip Ripper apart, no pun intended.

No, part of her had a good feeling that something else happened. Not because of logic, since that pretty much failed her, but because of a dark feeling deep down.

A feeling that connected her and Callous like a fine thread tied between them. "Sage, was Ripper acting...weird, at all?" she questioned uneasily.

Sage glanced at Jill, just as the other agents looked at her, which made her feel slightly uncomfortable. "...it's the strangest thing..." Sage began, as she scratched her beak. "After Proxy pulled you out of the dark, I started picking up some more than one brainwave from Ripper... five, in fact. And four of them were... coming from his blades."

"His blades?" Queen asked.

"I have no idea why... but it could have something to do with his duel against Callous, back at that volcano..." Sage continued, as she folded her arms. "Why do you ask, Jill?"

"Did he come into contact with Corruption?" Jill asked again.

"...h-he did." Miser uttered, as she glanced at Jill. "Callous grabbed one of his blades, and it spread a bit on them... but Sage sent Callous flying before it could get any further than his blades."

"Even though his blades are part of him, they're more like appendices than actual hands." Queen noted, as she glanced at Jill.

"Surely, that wouldn't be enough for the Corruption to register, right?"

"Maybe not with Ripper himself," Jill said, "but possibly with his blades. Corruption affects anyone and anything...and I think he became a puppet of his own obsession." Maybe not the best way of putting it, but that was one way of summing it up.

"...so what you're saying is..." Queen began, as she folded her arms. "...because Ripper's blades came in contact with Corruption... he's being possessed by his blades?"

"...that does sound ridiculous, when you think about it..." Proxy muttered.

"But..." King uttered, as he looked at Jill. "What does that have to do with Callous? D-did she talk him into following her, or something?!"

"Callous is a chip off the old block; the old block being Deity," Jill explained. "She has the power to manipulate anything under the influence of Corruption, and since Callous likely can promise the opportunity of killing, Ripper could easily be persuaded."

"Hey!" King suddenly said, as he walked up to Jill. "Are you accusing my comrade of being a mindless killer?!"

"...and you're saying that he isn't?" Proxy questioned, though that made King glare at the android.

"You listen! If it hadn't been for those damn days, he'd..." King began, but he trailed off. Then, he stormed out of the HQ.

"King!" Shocked at seeing her friend act like that, Miser ran after him.

"...pro tip, Jillian; don't get King talking about the past. He just can't handle the thought." Sage said, as she gave out a sigh.

"...I'm sorry," Jill apologized with guilt. "Sometimes I have a habit of speaking before I think. It seems it got the best of me again..."

"Don't worry about it too much." Queen said, as she glanced

towards the door. "King's just distraught; he doesn't want to believe that any of his comrades would betray him."

"Weren't you with Metal Sonic for a brief period?" Proxy asked, as he raised an eyebrow.

"I never betrayed King by doing so." Queen reiterated, before she looked at Jill again. "You don't seem to know much about what we went through fifteen years ago, though I can't exactly blame you for that."

"Well, I had hard times of my own," Jill replied. "So in a way, I can empathize with you."

"...somehow, I doubt that." Queen said with a shrug, before she began walking down the hall. "I'll go and check on Dawn." she said before she fully left.

"...I don't doubt that you've had a hard time in your life, Jill..." Sage began, as she sat down. "...but for some of us, those days were a living hell. Especially Wiper, Ripper and Miser. They were only six, seven and eight years old during that... massacre..."

"Massacre?" Jill almost feared questioning it.

"...looks like you have a lot to learn." Sage sighed, just as she used her powers to force Jill into a sitting position. "Pay attention, but be warned; this is going to get graphic." Then, as she closed her eyes, the floor around them seemed to shatter, though now Jill and Sage weren't in a white void, but rather floating in the sky.

When Jill looked down, she saw a young cobra running for his life through some woods, before he eventually stopped, hiding behind a tree. "...did I lose them...?" the cobra uttered.

"Wiper?" Jill was amazed to see the serious snake she knew as such an innocent young boy.

"Hey, I think the runt went this way!" they'd hear a female voice say, something which startled the younger Wiper. Quietly peeking out from behind the tree, he quickly retracted himself when he saw some silhouettes approach from the woods. Gritting his teeth, he

began running for his life again.

"HEY! Get back here you little brat!" yelled a man's voice, followed by gunfire that startled Jill so much she jumped with a gasp.

Despite running as fast as he could, a bullet managed to strike Wiper's leg, causing him to cry out in pain, as he collapsed to the ground. "Good going! I'll hold him for ya!" Before Wiper could even hope to move away, a pair of long arms suddenly wrapped around him, as a female orangutang held him in place. "Tsch... damn runt. Making us waste too much time." she spat.

"Tell me about it," the male voice said. Jill found out it belonged to a big shark with lots of scars on him and crooked, jagged teeth. He was carrying an AK-47. "Why don't you just wise up and admit that there's no escape?" he chuckled deviously.

"Kkh... I... I can't die here..." Wiper uttered, as he desperately tried squirming out of the orangutang's grip, but to no avail.

"Look, we've wasted too much time here." the orangutang groaned, as she looked up at the shark. "Let's just kill the kid and continue moving for the goal. We'll probably be there by-" All of a sudden, the sound of leaves rustling caught her attention. "Hn? Who's there?"

The shark aimed his gun at the noise. "Come on out, or I'll shoot anyway!!!"

Jill glared at the scene going on. How could they pick on someone so small?! Then Jill remembered it was hard times, so she figured she wouldn't bother questioning it.

"Alright, you asked for it!" All of a sudden, a crackle of lightning shot out from the tree, striking the orangutang dead-on, knocking her away from Wiper. "Put that toy away, Jaws; you won't be needing it where you're going anyway!"

"Why don't you make me, Furball?!" the shark said.

"Okay!" Then, all of a sudden, the shark would feel a powerful grip around his neck, as a tiger, probably in his late teens, had grabbed him in a choke-hold. "Now drop the gun, or we'll have some fried fish

on the menu for tonight!"

The shark didn't argue anymore, dropping the gun with his hands up. "W-w-whatever you say, K-King!"

"Good boy." King said with a grin, as he pushed the shark away, before glancing towards Wiper, who was struggling to get to his feet. "...hey, kid." he said, walking towards the snake. "You're hurt; you shouldn't walk on that."

"Kkh... but I... have to make it to the goal!" Wiper coughed, as he eventually collapsed again; his leg hurt too much for him to be able to move.

"Don't waste your time King," the same shark snorted, as he ran off. "He's not worth it!"

King only gave the shark one last look, before looking down at Wiper. "...c'mon, kid, we've gotta get you some first-aid." he said, as he picked Wiper up, holding him over his shoulder.

At that point, however, the orangutang got back on her feet, glaring at King. "Damnit... I'm gonna get to that goal!" she said, as she pulled out a knife, before lunging at King. "And I don't care if I have to kill you to get there!"

As she said that, however, King suddenly grabbed her by the throat, glaring at her. "...you were gonna kill this kid, right? Not cool." As he said that, electricity coursed right through his arm, into the orangutang, who let out a pained, terrified yell, before seconds later, she slumped over. With a grunt, King threw the dead monkey on the ground. "I hate people who wanna kill kids." Then, he glanced behind him. "And you'll find that she does too, Jaws."

As the shark ran, all of a sudden, something slammed him right into the ground, pinning him there; a female bear who seemed to be around 14 years old was the culprit. "...hi." she uttered coldly.

"GET OFF MY BOYFRIEND!!!" something came after the bear that had the shark pinned; a lemur attempted to kick the bear in the face.

However, that kick only met a swift move from the bear, resulting in

her grabbing hold of the lemur's leg. "...your boyfriend tried killing a child." she said coldly, just as she hurled the lemur into a tree, before glaring down at the shark with a murderous glance. "That is not how a true warrior acts."

"Don't care," the lemur screamed. "He was being realistic; unlike your retarded warrior crap!"

"Yeah, who really gives two shits for what you think, Queen?" the shark added.

"...King does." Queen responded coldly, just as she mercilessly smashed her fist into the shark's face, leaving a crater underneath his head. "And you'd do well to keep your insults against him to yourself."

"CHOMPY!" cried the lemur. Then she shot Queen a deadly glare, "OH YOU BITCH!!!" She snatched up the shark's AK-45 and fired at Queen, taking care not to shoot "Chompy."

However, when she fired, Queen suddenly vanished, leaving the bullets to soar over Chompy. Then, all of a sudden, Queen reappeared right in front

of the lemur, grabbing her by the throat, and slamming her against a tree, so that the bark actually caved in. "If it will make you at peace, I'll send you to hell with your boyfriend." she said in a chilling tone.

"Go ahead and do it. I'm tired of listening to that annoying voice of hers," groaned a grumpy turtle that happened by.

"You wouldn't dare!" the lemur screamed. "After last night?!"

"I'm starting to regret last night," the turtle remarked.

The lemur then attempted to kick Queen off of her.

However, it was to no avail. Queen's grip remained firm, even as the lemur kicked her multiple times. "...very well. Tell your boyfriend that I never liked him." Then, she gave the lemur a punch so hard that the tree she was being held against actually shattered, sending her flying right through the woods. "...done."

"Thank God," the turtle muttered. Then when he saw Wiper, he picked up the little snake. "C'mon, I'll take you to the goal if you want," he said.

"Hey." King suddenly said, as he grabbed the turtle's shoulder, glaring at him. "I'm takin' the kid there, a'ight?" he said.

"You should hurry on." Queen said with a nod to the turtle. "King and I will take care of the boy."

"Alright then, if you two insist," the turtle said, handing Wiper over to King. "I think I ought to search for the other youngsters. If I'm correct, Prowler likes the little ones the best...and there's no telling what he'll do to Miser because of her immortality." Then the turtle walked off.

Watching the turtle walk off, Queen glanced at Wiper. "We should hurry. That wound could become infected if we don't fix it now."

"Yeah, yeah..." King muttered, as he placed Wiper on the ground. "I'll take care of this... just give me a sec..."

At that point, however, the scenery changed, as Jill and Sage now overlooked a mountain-range, or more specifically, a cave. There, they'd see a young, female rhino, along with a young, male praying mantis, hiding in the cave. "Do you think they're gone?" the rhino uttered in fear.

"I-I dunno..." the mantis uttered, as he gulped. "I mean, we didn't see anyone on the way here, right?"

"Miser and Ripper," Jill muttered as she recognized them.

Unfortunately, the peace didn't last for the two of them as an unnerving chuckle echoed through the cave.

Gulping in fear, Ripper suddenly wrapped his arms around Miser, looking around. "Wha-what was that?" he uttered.

"I don't know..." Miser said in an equally fearful tone. "...but I don't think we're alone."

"Gee, how did you ever figure that out?" From the dark farther in the dark, a figure walked toward them. Jill eventually saw that it was a male hyena who was a late teen himself; almost an adult. "Don't worry...Prowler's not gonna be *too* rough with ya."

"P-P-Prowler?" Ripper said in a nervous tone, as he let go of Miser, before the two slowly backed away.

"And where do ya think you're goin', huh?" However, right behind them, a male elephant and a female giraffe approached the two kids from behind. "Boss Prowler just told ya that he wouldn't be too rough with ya kids." the elephant said with a nasty grin.

"Yeah, no need to be impolite about it," snickered Prowler. Then he turned to the elephant and the giraffe. "Hold down the insect. The little rhino's mine."

"You got it, boss Prowler." the elephant chuckled, as both he and the giraffe approached Ripper, both of them cracking their knuckles.

"...please, don't..." Miser said in a frightened tone, as she backed away from Prowler, without taking her eyes off him.

"Miser..." Ripper uttered, before he glared at the elephant and giraffe. "...you leave her alone!" he yelled, as he rushed at them, but the giraffe was quicker, kicking Ripper right into a stone wall.

"The little bug's got guts!" the elephant said with a grin, before he gave the giraffe a nod. "Let's see if he's still got them when we're done with 'im!" he added, as he and the giraffe approached Ripper, who was still struggling to get back up.

Prowler cackled at the sheer terror that he saw in Miser, as he took her with his hand. "Aren't you a sweet little thing?" he sneered.

Jill instantly recognized the kind of look that Prowler had, and she shook her head with widened eyes. "No..." she pleaded.

"Gnh..." Miser uttered, as she tried getting out of Prowler's grip, but to no avail. "D-don't hurt me..." she said, as she was on the verge of tears.

"Miser..." Ripper coughed, just as he was kicked by the giraffe again. "Kkh..." Before he could hope to recover, the elephant picked him up, and began punching Ripper multiple times, leaving the mantis bruised, bloodied and battered.

"Not gonna hurt'cha yet," Prowler chuckled. "But you might learn what the 'bad touch' is when I'm done."

"He WOULDN'T!!!" Jill uttered in disgust.

"Prowler, you put your hand where it shouldn't be, and we'll have a problem."

Outside the mouth of the cave, the same turtle stood there.

Seeing the turtle, Prowler rolled his eyes and groaned. "Oh look, it's Desperado to the rescue!"

The turtle referred to as Desperado folded his arms. "It's not just me, you filthy child molester. Everyone's fed up with your disgusting obsession."

"Tsch... like he'll be any problem." the elephant grunted, as he dropped Ripper, before glancing at the giraffe. "You take care of the kid; I'll handle wonder-turtle over there." Then, he walked towards the turtle, cracking his knuckles. "If ya wanna get to boss Prowler, ya gotta go through me first, Desperado!"

While he walked towards the turtle, the giraffe glanced down at Ripper, and with a wicked grin, she began kicking the mantis several times while he was down. "Agh!" Ripper croaked, as he weakly looked up at the giraffe every time she kicked him.

"Maybe I don't know any better, but I'd have to say that your acts are sickening," Desperado commented sternly.

Prowler smirked, and as a way to aggravate the turtle more, he actually licked Miser's neck.

Jill was horrified at the act, and so was Desperado. "I'm warning you Prowler!"

"He's not gonna listen to ya, Desperado." the elephant said snidely, as he reeled his fist back for a punch. "Now, batter up, wonder-turtle!"

"Miser..." Ripper uttered, as he watched just how helpless Miser looked whilst Prowler licked her neck. That, and the giraffe kicking him multiple times, actually got some life in the mantis again. Then, just as the giraffe was about to kick him one more time, he suddenly sprung up. "YAAAAAAAH!!!" Then, he swung one of his blade-arms at the giraffe.

At first, her expression read that she was stunned at this. However, this expression didn't change, as her head slowly slid off her elongated neck, dropping to the floor, as a geyser of blood spurted out from where her head used to be, covering Ripper in the crimson liquid.

Jill covered her mouth as she continued to watch wide-eyed in horror.

"Shit," Desperado uttered, "He snapped." As the elephant tried to punch him, he tucked his head into his shell. Then with a leap, he retreated inside his shell entirely as it spun around rapidly. Then with a speed that almost rivaled Sonic's, he slammed himself into the elephants stomach.

"OOF!" Unable to evade that blow, the elephant crashed into the cave. But he was quick to get up, as he glared at Ripper, who stood completely still, watching the bleeding body of the giraffe. "Holy shit... he actually killed her!" Growling, the elephant began rushing at Ripper. "Ya little shit! I'll teach ya to mess with-"

The moment he got close enough, however, he stopped, though not of his own volition. Four blades were jabbed right into his abdomen, and all four of them were soaked in blood. "...red... red water..." Ripper chanted, as he looked at the elephant, with blood-shot eyes. "Ke... keke... the red water... it's warm... kekeke..."

"Kkh..." the elephant coughed, as he looked down at Ripper, who seemed to have lost his grip on reality. "B-boss Prowler... y-ya gotta he-" Suddenly, Ripper slashed his blades outwards, tearing the

elephant's gut open, spilling more blood on the small mantis, before the elephant keeled over; dead.

"...kekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he looked down at the body, a smile slowly creeping across his lips. "Kekekekeke..."

"...oh my god," Prowler muttered. It wasn't because his comrades were dead; in fact, he would've cared less for them. It was the fact that this little kid actually had the galls to kill...and now it would be coming after him.

Being distracted by Ripper, Prowler couldn't stop Desperado do the same attack he had done, but to him this time as his spinning shell struck him. The hyena was sent flying while Desperado took Miser safely in his own arms. "Are you alright, hon?" he asked her.

"I-I'm alright..." Miser uttered, as she glanced at Ripper, and strangely enough, she didn't seem too affected at seeing Ripper covered from head-to-toe in blood, or the bodies of his victims. "...but what about him?"

"Kekekekekeke..." Ripped began laughing, as he walked forward, eyes peeled on the fallen hyena. "Kekekekekeke... red water feels good..." Now, he actually began running towards Prowler, as his small smile became a fully-blown, psychotic grin. "KEKEKEKEKEKEKEKE! MORE RED WATER! MORE!!!"

"No! PLEASE!!!" pleaded Prowler; the situation seeming totally ironic now.

Desperado shook his head. "It's only poetic justice you bastard," he said. "You deserve to go to hell."

"...yeah." Miser said with a nod, as she watched Ripper rush towards Prowler. Without delay, the mantis had sliced the hyena's arms clean off, before proceeding to stab him multiple times in the gut.

"MORE! MORE!! MOOOOORE!!! KEKEKEKEKEKEKEKEKEKE!!!" was all Ripper yelled, as the part of the cave where Prowler had been launched slowly, but

surely, became permanently stained with blood.

At that point, the scene faded away, as Sage sighed. "Poor thing..." she muttered.

Jill was shaking like a leaf in the wind, and she buried her face in her hands as she tried to keep herself from crying. It really had been bad, and even if Jill's experience couldn't have been any different, (and knowing Deity, it wasn't all that different at all), she was older and she could cope with it better.

Ripper, Miser and Wiper were much younger then she was.

"Believe me when I say that..." Sage began, as she glanced down again. "...it gets much worse."

Soon, the scene had changed to a cliff, where they would see a teenaged, female raven sitting by herself, meditating.

"Saaaaaaaaaage..." chanted a voice.

However, Sage didn't even move, or flinch at this, as she sat perfectly still. "Whaaaaaaaaaat?" she replied in a mocking tone.

Seeing who called Sage's name, Jill gasped again, but her reaction became even more fearful and horrified at who she saw. "No! Not THEM!"

They were butterfly twins; one pink and one blue. Both were dressed in equality according to their color, and while one looked cheerful and happy-go-lucky, one looked very afraid and jittery.

The scariest thing of it all was that Jill knew who they were.

Chapter 32

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The present Sage blinked, as she glanced at Jill. "You know them?"

Meanwhile, the past Sage remained in place, without looking back at the two butterflies. "And what do you two want?" she asked.

"Come play with us Sage!" the pink one pestered.

"Y-yeah, Everybody's either t-too mean or t-too…busy to play with us…" added the blue one.

"If their names are Bloom and Gloom, then I know them," Jill said. "But…I never knew…"

"Play with us…or we'll get some bigger bullies to make you play with us."

A lot of other figures appeared from the dark, all of them being the rest of the GUN operatives that were older than Sage; A cheetah, a panther, a beaver, a rat, and a koala bear.

"I knew they'd show their true colors," Jill growled.

"I'm sorry, but I have no time for games." Sage said with a shrug, without looking at the present company. "I'm a bit busy, you see."

"Well guess what? You're going to be busier now," muttered the koala bear as he cracked his knuckles.

"Grab her!" cheered the rat.

Since the cheetah and the panther were the fastest, they reached over to try and grab Sage; Bloom and Gloom did as well.

However, when they got close enough, they all stopped, frozen in place. "H-hey, what's wrong, guys?" the beaver uttered, as he looked at the four who simply couldn't move. "C'mon, get a move

on!"

"Oh, they'll move, alright..." Sage said playfully, as suddenly, Bloom and Gloom, along with the panther and cheetah, were pushed away from the raven. "...but not towards me. I already told you; I don't have time for your little hi-jinks."

"Crap…" growled the rat.

At that point, the beaver snapped his fingers, as he motioned for Gloom to approach him.

"Now, why won't you all just leave? You could get to the goal a bit sooner, if you weren't busy pestering others." Sage said, as she was still not looking at the group.

Gloom hesitated, shaking severely. Then Bloom pushed her toward the beaver.

Shushing the small butterfly, the beaver shoved something in her hands; a taser. Then, he suddenly ran at Sage again, yelling quite loudly.

"Not gonna listen to reason, are you?" Sage muttered, as the beaver suddenly froze in mid-air, just before he could reach the raven. "Look, you're seven people. You could easily just go to the goal now, and save us all this trouble."

With the wheels turning in her head, Gloom realized what to do. With the taser, Gloom snuck up behind Sage and jabbed it into her back to shock her.

As she was still holding the beaver in check, Sage didn't anticipate that blow, as she let out a cry of pain from the shock, before she eventually fell to the ground, heaving for her breath.

"Alright, while she's down!" the beaver said, as he glanced at his comrades. "Get her!"

No sooner had the beaver said that than when they jumped her. The cheetah and the panther grabbed her arms while Bloom and Gloom grabbed her legs, and the rat stood back laughing at Sage as it all

happened at once.

Jill was, again, horrified at what was going on.

"AGH!" Sage cried out, as she tried getting them off her, but to no avail. "Damn it! Get off of me!" she yelled.

"Hah! No one's gonna help ya now!" the beaver said, as he stood back along with the rat.

Just then, the present Sage sighed. "If you thought Ripper's psyche snapping was a horrifying sight... don't watch this, Jill." she said, as she closed her eyes.

"…w-why?" uttered Jill.

"...you've never seen me angry, have you?" Sage responded, as she looked down at the scene again. "...here's your chance."

"I said..." the past Sage uttered, as all of a sudden, her eyes began glowing. "...GET OFF!" At that point, a psychic aura suddenly exploded around her, blowing the ones holding her down off her. Then, she began floating in the air, giving the group the most nightmare-inducing look ever.

Bloom and Gloom were easily terrified being an age no younger than 8 themselves. While they backed away, the rat nearly panicked.

"SHE'S GONNA KILL US!" he screamed.

"Oh, shut it Mongrel," the panther hissed, trying not to show that he was afraid himself.

"Y-yeah, come on!" the beaver said, albeit a bit nervously. "I mean, what's the worst that she can-" However, he didn't get to finish that sentence, as his eyes widened; before he held his throat, like he was choking on something.

"The worst I can do?" Sage uttered, as she was glaring at the beaver. "...you're lucky; you won't live to see that."

At that point, the beaver sank to his knees, as he was actually gagging, before blood eventually began seeping out from under his eyes. Then, he fell to the ground with a spasm as foam began collecting around his mouth.

"Now..." Sage uttered in a terrifying tone, as she glared at the group. "...who's next?"

The rat, Mongrel, squealed like a girl and tried to scurry away fearfully. So did Bloom and Gloom, but unlike the rat, they tried to fly away. The cheetah and panther simply stood their ground, too shocked to move.

As Bloom, Gloom and Mongrel tried getting away; however, some form of barrier blocked them from getting away, as Sage slowly floated towards the group. All of a sudden, the cheetah was hurled up into the air, before his limbs were stretched out by some unseen force. "I could read your minds back there... have none of you any shame?" Sage yelled, and at that point, the cheetah was suddenly violently torn apart, as his limbs were launched off the cliff.

"NO!" cried the panther, as like the others, they pounded on the barrier to plead for help or try to get away.

But they couldn't.

"A gang of hooligans teaming up against one girl is one thing... but to think that you had children involved in it!" Just then, the panther and the koala were launched up in the air, as they were repeatedly slammed against one another, before both of their bodies were hurled off the cliff.

That left Bloom and Gloom, and Mongrel the only victims left, as the three of them looked at Sage in hopeless fright.

"And what's worse..." Sage uttered, as Mongrel was suddenly hoisted up into the air. "...this was all planned by those very children." Without any warning, Mongrel's entire body was compressed, his arms, legs and head digging into his body, before he, too, was flung off the cliff. "What do you two have to say for yourselves?" she uttered in a venomous tone, as she looked down

at the butterflies.

They were silent, and as afraid as ever; Gloom hiding behind Bloom as usual, which left the pink one to answer, "We…don't know any b-better?"

"Bull," remarked Jill coldly as she saw this. Unlike the others, Jill didn't mind seeing what would happen to them; she KNEW of things they had done…

"...that's a load of bull, if I ever heard it." Sage uttered, as suddenly, both Bloom and Gloom were lifted up in the air, so that they were looking Sage in her eyes. "Any last words?" she said, as the two butterflies would feel something expanding within their bodies, slowly and painfully.

Bloom smirked, despite the situation they were in. "Yeah," she said. "Up yours, beak-face." Sure, a lame insult, but the girl was 8; what would anyone else expect?

"...thank you for sharing that." Sage uttered, as all of a sudden, without any form of hesitance, both Bloom and Gloom's bodies exploded in a shower of guts and blood, leaving virtually no trace of the two butterflies.

Jill jumped right when it happened, but was somewhat satisfied that the past Sage did that. Shortly after that happened though, the scene changed again. It went back to the woods, in the darker parts.

Jill saw a wolf in his late teens, sitting underneath the shade of the tree to stay away from the moonlight. "It's….a full moon again…" he uttered, rocking back and forth in the fetal position, near the brink of panic.

"Oh my—is that Hunter?" Jill questioned.

"...I mean really, where is the justice in that?" As both Jill and Hunter would hear, someone was approaching the place Hunter was hiding; as it turned out, it was King and Queen, with Wiper sleeping on King's shoulders. "Can ya honestly believe that they'd put little kids in a group with Prowler?" King said, as he was looking at the bear.

"Some people must have a sick sense of humor..." Queen responded, as she shook her head.

Hunter tried to ignore them, but he grew more afraid that if he even moved a single inch out of the shade of the tree, he would turn. He had already hurt a couple of the children by accident…he didn't want it to happen again.

"Hm... King, we should stop." Queen said, which made King raise an eyebrow. "We can't let the kid keep on sleeping on your shoulders; it won't be comfortable for him at all."

"Hrm... you're right." King said with a nod, as he looked around. "Isn't there some place we can hide for the night? I mean, sleeping under the moon is cool and all, but I'd feel more comfy with a ceiling over me."

"Look, I-" Queen began, when she stopped. "...King. There's someone here." she said.

"What? Where?" King inquired, as he looked around.

"There's one hiding in the woods, close by..." Queen said, as she closed her eyes. "...and one coming right at us, from behind."

Hunter shook and closed his eyes. He was supposed to be tough… he was supposed to stand and fight. But he didn't want to hurt anyone else innocent.

He felt so helpless like the children, but he was much too ashamed to admit it.

"Wait..." Queen muttered, as she glanced behind her. "There's not just one... there's several."

"Several what?" King asked, as he looked behind him, just as both of them noticed something flying towards them; namely, a large swarm of bees. "...crap, it's Zipper!" he said, as he took Wiper off his shoulders and hurriedly threw him into the woods; coincidentally, where Hunter was hiding.

Of course, this act got Queen to look at him with an astounded look.

"...King, what did you just do?" she uttered.

"Hey, we can't stand around all day; we've got bees!" All of a sudden, the swarm managed to reach King and Queen, surrounding the two, as they tried swatting them away.

Hunter was startled to see a child land right by his feet, but he took up the child quickly and brought him into hiding with him. Wiper had been one of the children he accidentally hurt from before. Hunter's hands shook while he held him as he realized this.

"For crying out- Zipper, get your damn bees away from me!" King bellowed, as he discharged electricity around him, instantly felling the tiny bees, letting them fall to the ground.

"Now, now, King, you have to control your temper." they heard a voice say, as soon, a much larger bee approached King and Queen, with a sophisticated smile on his lips. "Thankz to you, zome of my friendz are dead. Do you think that I'd take that zitting down?"

"Zipper, you know just as well as us that they were asking for it." Queen said, as she folded her arms. "If we hadn't killed them, others would have."

"Oh, but you killed them, zo you'll have to be punizhed." Zipper chuckled, as several more bees flew out from around the woods, surrounding the larger bee. "But rezt azzured; I'll bury you zomeplace nice..."

Hunter saw what was going on. He knew that King and Queen were not like the others; hell, they were like saints in the sea of children that GUN had attempted to train. Right now, they were going to be abused by one of the others.

Had he any sense, he would've remained where he was hiding, but no. He was fed up with what everyone did to the few who were constantly abused…

So he stepped out of hiding, making sure that Wiper was comfortably hidden.

The moment he did that, the moonlight hit him. Finally, without any

more fear anymore of what he would become, he transformed. "Hey Zipper!" Hunter snarled; his voice rapidly changing to a more gruff and grizzly voice.

"Hm? Who darez interrupt my-" Zipper began, as he turned his head towards the sound of the noise, when he saw Hunter. Immediately, he reeled back. "H-Hunter! What the hell are you doing here?" he said.

Blinking, King and Queen looked at Hunter as well, both of them a bit surprised. "...Hunter?" Queen uttered; seeing Hunter transform was a first for her.

Hunter was like an even bigger wolf, but four-times hairier and so built up that it was scary. Sage noted that it wasn't much different that what she had seen of Ani. He opened his mouth to show the bee vicious teeth.

Jill realized that he had gone Werewolf.

It even was to a point Hunter didn't bother conversing. He howled into the air uncontrollably, and then started off in a devastatingly rapid run after the bee. "HUNGRY!" the werewolf barked.

"AAH!" With a girlish scream, Zipper covered his face, as he seemingly tried to protect himself from the incoming attack. "Pleaze, don't hurt me!"

At that point, however, Queen's eyes widened. "...Hunter, wait!" she called, but...

"Fooled you, ztupid wolf!" Just as it looked like Hunter would be able to maul the bee, a swarm of smaller bees suddenly lifted Zipper over the attack, letting him laugh as he sailed out of reach. "Come, my friendz; we'll zhow theze foolz our ztrength!" At that point, a massive swarm of bees rocketed down right at Hunter, though the formation they flew in looked like a spear.

"Damn it!" Acting quickly, King sent an arc of electricity at the incoming bee swarm, blasting it out of the sky before it could reach Hunter. "The bee farmer really wants to kill us!"

Hunter panted with his tongue hanging out, but he glared up at Zipper with a rage. With a growl, he barked like a rabid dog at the bee.

Then as a surprise to the bee, Hunter took a head start run, and leaped an almost impossible height, grabbing maybe not Zipper, but a couple of his little friends in his mouth. Then when he was back on the ground with a mouthful of bees, he crunched them in his jaws, chewing and spitting out the dead bees one by one.

"EEP!" Seeing Hunter even leap up that high was enough for Zipper to lose his cool. "Err... ztay out of zhis, Hunter! You've got no buzinezz with me, zo zcram!" he called, trying to regain his composure. At that point, a bolt of electricity shot right next to Zipper, which made the bee reel back. "EEP!"

"Damn bee..." King muttered, as he shot out more electricity at Zipper, though the bee was more agile, having his friends carry him away from the lightning's path. "Wasting our time like this."

Soon, however, Zipper's expression changed from a panicked one, to a more confident one. "...wazting time, eh?" As he said that, the three noticed something being carried up in the air, or rather, someone. "Maybe if I raize the ztakez, you'll take zhis a lot more zeriouzly!" As it turned out, a swarm of bees had carried the still-sleeping Wiper up to the bee's level, before he took hold of the sleeping snake.

"A hostage..." Queen uttered, as she growled. "That damn coward!"

From out of the air, a certain turtle shell came spinning towards Zipper; again, rivaling Sonic's speed.

"Hn?" However, even with Sonic's speed, the bees managed to get Zipper out of its path, though several of them were struck down by the shell. "Oh, for- Dezperado! Why doez everyone in the world meddle in my buzinezz?"

"Desperado?" King uttered, as he tilted his head. "Wasn't he looking for Prowler?"

Once Desperado landed on his feet, he turned to King. "I've got good news and bad news King," he said. "Good news is that Prowler and his lowly minions are actually dead and currently in the pits of hell. The bad news is…Ripper killed them. And he snapped. BAD." Then when he saw Hunter, he almost flinched. "Good God man, what happened to you?"

Hunter wolfed. Then he turned his nose up at Zipper, and snarled.

Desperado looked up and realized that Wiper was in the bee's grasp. "…crap."

"Yeah, he managed to snatch the kid..." King muttered, as he cracked his neck. "I'd have fried the bastard long ago, but I'd hit the kid, and... well, that'd kill him."

"Wait, Ripper snapped?" Queen inquired, as she looked at the turtle. "And he killed Prowler's gang? By himself?" Blinking, she approached the turtle. "What about Miser? Is she alright?"

"Hello, I'm ztill up here!" At that point, more bees shot down at the group, but King was quick enough to shoot down more of them. "Aha! How do you feel now, zuckerz? You want to ztrike me down? Fat chance!"

At that point, Wiper began waking up, as he glanced drowsily at Zipper, wondering just how he got in his grasp. "...hn?"

"I managed to save Miser before Prowler was going to do what he wanted to do," Desperado said. "But she ran off after Ripper, hoping to stop him from getting more 'red water' as he called it."

Hunter suddenly picked up Desperado. "Throw!" he barked.

Desperado was taken off guard by this, but he soon realized what Hunter meant. With a nod, Hunter took the turtle as he retreated into his shell, and then the werewolf threw the turtle effortlessly like a discus.

This time, the aim was to grab Wiper, rather than hit Zipper. It would be a bonus if both were achieved though.

However, like the last time he tried, Desperado missed, as the bees quickly carried Zipper even higher, as the bee began laughing. "HAH! Pathetic! You couldn't hope to ztop me, even if you had a battalion of tankz by your zide! Now, all of you can go ztraight to- YEOW!"

As it turned out, Zipper's monologue had given Wiper time to sink his fangs into the bee's arm, as he kept his teeth firmly sinked into the bee. "You leave them alone!" he said, as he bit down again.

"OW! You little-!" Zipper uttered, when all of a sudden, his body locked up. "Aah... what'z thiz? I can't move!" he uttered, as his entire body had been paralyzed by Wiper's venom. However, this led to him dropping Wiper, letting the snake fall towards the ground.

Desperado managed to stop in the middle of the air, and charge right back to catch Wiper, smoothly landing on his own feet with Wiper in his arms.

In the meantime, Hunter stampeded after the falling Zipper. "HUNGRY!"

"W-wait! We-we can talk about zhis, can't we?" Zipper pleaded, as the bees were actively flying away from Zipper now. "I-I can forget about zhat whole thing with King and Queen! Juzt... FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, DON'T LET THAT BEAZT NEAR ME!"

However, Zipper's pleads fell on deaf ears, as King and Queen approached Desperado. "Phew... you scared me for a while there, kiddo. Good going!" King said, as he rubbed Wiper's head with a smile.

"...thanks." Wiper said, as he looked up at King with a small smile of his own.

"Desperado." Queen said, as she looked at the turtle. "You said that Ripper and Miser ran off... where were they heading?"

"Ripper ran off towards the South," Desperado said. "We have to get to them before the worst happens."

Hunter caught Zipper in his teeth, and then the scourge began.

Hunter took Zipper with his hands and began ripping the bee apart with his jaws; down to the point where bloody chunks of Zipper were all on the ground.

"HUNTER!"

The werewolf flinched, and his head perked up as he glanced at Desperado.

"That's enough," he said. "I've seen enough blood already…besides, you've got a little something on your chin there," the turtle gestured to his own chin to place where he meant.

Hunter was seen flicking off a piece of flesh that was on his face.

Jill shuddered.

"Yeah, as I said, it only got worse." Sage sighed, as the scene changed once more, back to the cliff where the past Sage had committed mass-murder. It was still night, and apart from the bloody remains of what had used to be Bloom and Gloom's gang, no one was there.

Well, not on the cliff itself, per se. Further down below, sleeping in a small cave, was the past Sage, who was still covered in blood from the earlier slaughter. However, the silence wouldn't last.

"More red water! More! Kekekekekeke!"

"Ripper, please, wait!"

"Oh no…" Jill muttered uneasily.

Yes, running out of the woods were Ripper and Miser, and Ripper was still covered from head to toe in blood. "More! Kekekeke-" he began, when he noticed the grisly amount of blood on the cliff-side, something that made him gasp. "So much red water!"

"Ripper!" Before Ripper could move, Miser quickly grabbed him from behind, holding him in place with a hug. "Please... don't yell. Someone else like Prowler could come, and..."

"That would be great!" Ripper laughed. "Then I'd get to see more red water! Kekekekeke!"

"No…" Jill uttered. She was starting to think about it. Only seven of them made it out of here; that meant that certain others were killed other than the ones that had been in a gruesome fashion. Like Desperado…

And speaking of the turtle, he was the first to pop out of the woods hurriedly. Then he spotted Ripper and Miser. "RIPPER!" he bellowed, running after him.

"No stop!" Jill cried, almost getting the feeling what might happen.

"...more people?" Ripper uttered, as he glanced at Desperado with a psychotic grin. "More red water..." Cackling, he was quick to tear himself out of Miser's grip, running towards Desperado. "LET ME FEEL THE RED WATER! KEKEKEKEKEKEKEKE!"

"RIPPER, STOP!" At that point, Ripper leapt up in the air, pulling two of his blades back, ready to slash them down on Desperado...

...but when he did, he hit someone else entirely, which made him double back in shock. "M-Miser?" Ripper uttered.

As it turned out, Miser had leapt right in between Desperado and Ripper, taking the blow for Desperado, though the two blades had shot right through her body, failing to reach the turtle. "...Ripper..."

Desperado was startled at the sight and almost worried for Miser's safety...

...then he remembered that she was immortal. Even then, he couldn't exactly take it so easily. "Miser?" he uttered.

Neither could Jill, and even if she did remember that Miser was immortal as well, it was...all the more traumatic seeing a young girl take a hit like that.

As the two kids fell on the ground, Ripper pulled out his blades from Miser, who held her wounds, despite not being in any mortal danger. "Ripper..." she uttered, as she looked at the mantis. "...you can't kill

him. He's a friend... you can't kill your friends, Ripper..."

"...f-friend?" Ripper uttered, as he sank to his knees. "Ke... kekekekeke... he's a... friend...?" As the mantis spoke, what had happened finally got to him, as he broke down in tears, despite still laughing that laugh from time to time. "Kekekekeke... I-I'm sorry... I didn't mean to..." he sobbed.

"Its okay, Ripper..." Miser said, as she gave the mantis a hug. "He's alright... none of our friends got hurt, so don't be sad..."

"Well, pardon my pun, but we're not out of the woods yet," Desperado said. "We're still gotta get you two to the goal along with the rest."

"...the rest?" Miser said, as she glanced back at Desperado, without letting go of Ripper. "Who are the rest, again?"

At that point, in the cave, Sage had woken up, and was attempting to listen in to whatever conversation was going on above her.

Desperado knelt down to Miser. "King and Queen are with Wiper at the moment, and I don't know where Hunter ran off to. I also don't know where Sage is, but Miser…all the bad people are gone as far as I know. Things are going to be a little better from now on." Of course, he was still forgetting the last three, but even if he did remember them, he didn't want to tell that to a little girl.

"...so we're all safe?" Miser asked, before she smiled just a bit. "That... that sounds nice."

"Wha- HEY!" At that point, they'd hear a new, male voice coming from the woods. "Phew! Survivors... for a moment, I thought I was the only one left!"

"Who's there?" Desperado called, standing up and stepping in front of the children for safety measures.

"Woah, woah, no need to get defensive, Desperado! It's just me; Sprinter!" At that point, a male rabbit stepped out of the woods, looking a bit flustered, but smiling nonetheless. "And Miser and Ripper's with you too, huh? That's a relief."

Desperado eased, but after all the events that happened that night, he made sure not to let his guard down. "Take it easy on them Sprinter," he said. "They went through hell tonight…" He couldn't help but stare at the blood-stained Ripper after he said that.

"Eesh, I can see that..." Sprinter uttered, as he reeled a bit back from seeing Ripper like that. "...but in any case, I'm glad you're alright. Say, I heard you saying something about King and Queen. They're still alive?"

Slowly, Sage had gotten out of the cave she was sleeping in, listening in on the conversation, without making herself known to the two.

"Yes, they are," Desperado replied. "They've got Wiper with them, and then I said Hunter ran off somewhere." He decided to keep the 'werewolf' detail out.

"Phew... good to know that there's still some good guys in the game." he muttered, before glancing from side to side. "...listen, Desperado. I gotta tell you-"

"Excuse me for interrupting..." At that point, Sage stepped up to where the group was, as she looked at them curiously. "...but can't a lady have some sleep around here?"

"Oh, Sage, there you are," Desperado said. "I had no idea you were sleeping, so—!" He stopped, seeing how bloodstained Sage was, and then he glanced at the dead bodies. "…you were responsible for them, weren't you?" he questioned, looking back at Sage.

"...they were asking for it." Sage replied bluntly, as she yawned. "In any case, what are you guys doing here?"

"Hey, I think I have an idea!" Sprinter said, as he clapped his hands together. "Why can't we try and find King, Queen, Hunter and Wiper together? Then we can formulate a plan to get to the goal, right?"

"That sounds reasonable," Desperado said with a nod. "Although I believe you were about to say something Sprinter. What was it you needed to tell me?"

"Um... never mind." Sprinter said, as he scratched the back of his head. "It can wait, until we find the others!"

"You sure?" Desperado asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, totally!" Sprinter nodded, as he pointed behind him. "Now let's hurry; the longer we wait here, the longer it'll take us to get to the goal!"

"Alright then," Desperado said, taking Miser and Ripper's hands as he led them on.

Jill shuffled even more nervously. "I don't like the suspense Sage," she uttered. "What was it that Sprinter had to tell?"

"...Sprinter is a sad case." Sage said, as she sighed. "He wanted the best... but he was a bit impulsive."

When the past Sage walked past Sprinter, he actually gulped, as he took out a small sphere from his person. *Forgive me...* he thought, but Sage made it so Jill could hear his thoughts. *...but I have to do this.* Then, he spun around, before hurling the sphere towards where Desperado went.

As it turned out, when the sphere struck land, it released a thick cloud of gas, which instantly covered Sage, Ripper, Miser and Desperado. "Wha-!" Sage uttered, as she began coughing. "Kn-knock-out... gas..." she managed to say, before she fainted, and soon, the kids followed suit.

"Damn it Sprinter…" Desperado wheezed. "…why?" He was ashamed that he actually let his guard down. After a moment, he too fell into unconsciousness.

"...I hope you can forgive me..." Sprinter uttered, as he waited for the gas to clear out. Once it did, he made his way to Desperado, before grabbing Miser and Ripper. "But I can't let two kids be slaughtered by them..." Then, he ran off into the woods.

Jill watched as uneasily as ever…

At that point, the scenery began following Sprinter, as he kept

running through the woods, every so often looking behind him with an uneasy look.

"Hey, King! I heard someone over there!"

Sprinter's eyes widened; that voice belonged to Queen. *No... if she sees me with the kids... no, stick with the plan! I have to-* All of a sudden, he stopped, as he saw someone standing in front of him, concealed in the dark. "...y-you're-"

Just then, the stranger suddenly ran at Sprinter, and before the rabbit could move, the stranger punched him right through the stomach, leaving a gaping hole in his gut. "Did you think you could stop their plan?" the stranger uttered, as he pulled his fist away, whilst Sprinter collapsed. "Don't be a fool." he scoffed, before vanishing into the darkness again.

"…stop their plan?" Jill asked in wondering.

"You'll see soon." Sage said, as she closed her eyes.

"Over here; I definitely heard something!" Soon, King and Queen got to the scene, when they saw Sprinter's body. "...gods..." Queen uttered, as she knelt down by the rabbit, feeling his pulse. "...he's alive... but barely."

"Damn..." King uttered, as he snapped his fingers. "If that wound hadn't been so big, I could've fixed him up... but how did Miser and Ripper get with-" At that point, Sprinter suddenly grabbed King, looking up at the tiger. "Hn?"

"K-King... listen..." Sprinter croaked, as he coughed. "Y-you can't go to the g-goal... it's a... it's a trap..."

"Can't go to the goal?" Queen uttered, as she looked at Sprinter with a curious glance. "Why? What kind of trap is there?"

"It's a setup..." Sprinter coughed. "They... they're not gonna..." But before he could finish his sentence, he fell limp.

"Sprinter?" Queen said, as she felt his pulse again. "...he's dead."

"…oh no," Jill gasped, clasping her mouth with her hands.

Chapter 33

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"...we have to find Desperado." Queen said, as she stood up. "Let's hurry up." Then, as she picked up the kids, she ran through the woods again.

"...poor guy." King muttered, as he closed Sprinter's eyes out of respect. Then, he headed into a different part of the woods, likely to pick up Wiper.

Meanwhile, the scene shifted again, to another part of the woods.

Hunter was no longer in control of himself, blindly running through the forest on all fours like the canine he was. His tongue moist with blood hung out flopping in the wind as he ran.

"Heeeeey!" Hunter would eventually hear a female voice cut through the silence. "Like, who's there? Can you, like, give me a name, or something?"

Hunter screeched to a halt. He heard a voice. Curiously, his eyes peered around to see where the voice came from, or who it belonged to.

"Like, stay where you are, 'kay? I'll totally be right there!" Soon enough, Hunter saw the voice's owner come running towards him; a female sheep, who could only look at Hunter in awe. "Wow, you're, like, really huge! But haven't I, like, seen you around before?"

Hunter scratched his head with a nail. He didn't exactly remember who this was, since canine instincts were clouding his thought process. Then he put a hand on his chest gesturing to himself. "Hunter," he barked.

"Hunter?" the sheep said, as she tilted her head, before she began laughing. "Wow, you totally buffed up since I saw you last! So, like, how did you do that?" she said, before she stopped. "Oh, did you,

like, forget my name, or something? It's Bliss!"

"Bliss?" Hunter tapped his snout; still covered in blood. Somehow, it connected in his mushy werewolf brain and Hunter got a dopey grin. "BLISS!" he woofed, grabbing the sheep in a hug.

"Oh dear lord," Jill mumbled.

"Hey, hey, woah, like, personal space!" Bliss yelped, as she struggled to get out of Hunter's grip. "Respect my personal space!" At that point, Bliss' wool suddenly puffed up, creating enough space for Bliss to get out of Hunter's grip. "I'm, like, glad to see you too, but you could, like, give me a warning before you decide to hug me!"

Hunter nodded. Normally, he wasn't as enthusiastic to see the sheep, but it wasn't a daily basis that Hunter was a werewolf. Apparently, it was as if he had a different personality; lacking in some intelligence no less.

"Hmm... Hunter, I can't, like, put my finger on it, but you seem totally different tonight." Bliss said, as she looked at him. "Well, aside from, like, your new look. But anyway, do you, like, know if there's anyone else around here?"

Hunter counted on his fingers how many people he saw. "King, Queen, Wiper…uh," he glanced up at the sky in questioning. "… Despado?" It seemed like Hunter couldn't quite pronounce 'Desperado' right, but he looked to Bliss hoping that she knew who he was talking about.

"You mean Desperado?" Bliss questioned, before she sighed in relief. "You know, for a moment, I totally thought that, like, we were the only ones left." Then, she looked at Hunter with a smile. "So, like, let's go find the others! Once we get together, I can, like, take you to the goal!"

"Goal?" Hunter's reaction to that word was like a pet dog's reaction to hear the word, "Treat," or "Ball," or even "Frisbee." Either way, Hunter's reaction was the same, as he grew extremely excited. "GOAL!" he woofed, grabbing Bliss in a way that King Kong grabbed a fair maiden and started off through the forest.

"H-HEY, WAIT!" Bliss called, as she was carried off. "YOU'RE TOTALLY DISRESPECTING MY PERSONAL SPACE!"

At that point, the scene changed again, back to the cliff where Desperado and Sage were out cold. Right now, King, Queen and Wiper were watching over them, having placed Ripper and Miser by them. "...who do you think did this?" Queen inquired, as she looked at King.

"Maybe it was the same guy who offed Sprinter..." King muttered, as he walked over to Desperado, his right hand emitting electricity. "Well, time to wake up!" he said, before he placed the hand on the turtle, sending a light electric shock through his body.

Saying that Desperado was awakened was an understatement. The turtle jumped to his feet wide awake at the sudden pain he felt, uttering harsh curses- "KING YOU F*#)(*% B(#)%*()! G() DMN THAT M()$##(-F#($*#("- like no tomorrow until he noticed the child, Wiper, standing there. "…whoops, sorry about the language," he muttered sheepishly.

"...talk about overreacting." Queen muttered, as Wiper actually hid behind her, looking at Desperado in utter fear.

"Sheesh, see if I wake you up again." King growled sarcastically, before he placed the same hand on Sage. "Up and go, now!"

The moment he said that, Sage sprang to her feet, looking at King with a mildly annoyed look. "That wasn't necessary." she said with a surly tone, before brushing her wings off. "Hm... looks like Sprinter decided to bail on us." she muttered. "Wouldn't surprise me, after that little-"

"Sprinter's dead." Queen said with a serious tone.

"He's what?" Desperado couldn't believe what he had heard. First the rabbit gassed them, and now he was dead? "Who killed him? Do you know what happened?" he asked; part of him also wondering if it had anything to do with what Sprinter had to say to him.

"We don't know who killed him..." Queen muttered, as she folded her

arms. "...but we found him with Ripper and Miser, and he had a gaping hole through his gut. He was still alive then, but he only managed to say something about a trap, and something about the goal, before he succumbed to his wounds..."

"Poor guy." King muttered, as he placed his hands on Ripper and Miser, sending small shocks of electricity through them, which woke them up. "He didn't deserve something like that."

"Oh no," Desperado realized that Sprinter would've warned him about that. "I think he was trying to tell us that the goal is a trap," he deduced bluntly. "In that case, we have to find Hunter and stop him. Though I don't know how hard it will be to keep him under control with the state he's in," and he massaged his brows in frustration.

"But why would the goal be a trap?" Sage asked, as she looked at Desperado. "After all, we all have to get there to get out of this place, right?"

"Ssh!" Queen suddenly said, as she looked around the area. "...something's coming. It's big."

Desperado turned his eye in a direction, waiting to see what would come.

Soon, Sage's eyes widened, before she immediately closed them. "Everyone, move!" she said, just as she held her arms in front of her, creating an invisible force field in front of her.

At that point, they could hear something yelling through the woods. "LIKE, YOU'VE GOTTA SLOW DOWN, HUNTER, OR WE'RE, LIKE, GONNA CRASH!"

"Oh great," Desperado grumbled. It wasn't bad enough that it was Hunter coming their way, but he had to bring along…her; just by her manner of speech did it annoy the turtle to a high degree, with every 'like' uttered out of that mouth of hers.

Meanwhile, Hunter spotted the group long before, but failed to plant the brakes until the last minute. Skidding to a stop, he and Bliss were buried in a dust cloud that loomed toward the group. Once it

disappeared, Hunter dropped Bliss onto the ground with a plop. "Friends!" he barked, pointing at the group.

"…its one thing he brings Bliss," Desperado groaned, "but it's another thing when his intelligence has been demoted to a hapless gorilla."

"Ugh..." Bliss groaned, as she glanced in Desperado's direction. "Like, eat me, you hear?" she muttered, as she stuck her tongue out at him, just as she noticed the bloodied Ripper and Sage, along with the grisly mess on the cliff-side. "...okay, like, who decided to start shooting a horror flick over there?"

"Well, good to know that someone's still alive." Sage muttered, as she allowed the force field to fade away. "What are you doing here, Bliss?"

"Listen, we can, like, talk about that later." Bliss said, as she folded her arms. "Right now, we should, like, head for the goal! We've gotta stick together, and... well, my boyfriend's been gone for some time, now, and I'm, like, worried that he's a goner."

"Bliss, we shouldn't go there," Desperado said. "Sprinter died to warn us something bad…and it seems like he was trying to tell us that the goal is a setup; a trap."

"Goal, trap?" Hunter questioned in disbelief.

"Trap?" Bliss uttered, as she looked at Desperado. "But... like, we were told to get there, like, ASAP! Why make it a trap?"

"That's what has me worried as well." Sage shot in, as she folded her arms. "As far as I'm concerned, the only way we can get out of this area is through the goal. Who would decide to set up some form of trap there?"

"We'll just have to go find out, then!" King spoke up, as he cracked his knuckles. "We're this close to being free... we can't let the chance slip past us!"

"Despite the circumstances, both Sage and King are right, unfortunately," Desperado admitted.

"PLOW THROUGH! PLOW THROUGH!" cheered Hunter, jumping up and down and apparently unaware that he was causing the ground to shake, likely scaring the children.

"Right, Hunter, we'll do that," Desperado said in an annoyed tone. "Just stop jumping!"

Hunter promptly stilled.

Jill was somewhat relaxed by Hunter's comical nature, but she knew there were bad things to come; she wanted this to end to see what happened. Obviously, suspense was taking its toll on her. "…Sage, what happened when they got there?" she asked weakly.

"...the most traumatic thing to happen to all our lives." Sage sighed, as she waved her arm one time.

When she did that, the scene changed, this time to a pond, in front of an entrance into a canyon. Soon, the nine approached this area.

"It's, like, right through there." Bliss said, as she pointed into the canyon. "I, like, overheard some people with Mongrel earlier on. They said that, like, the goal's through a canyon."

"So... we'll be out of here, soon?" Miser asked, as she looked quite happy.

"Kekekekeke! We can go home!" Ripper chimed in.

"Alright, let's get moving!" King said, as he began moving, when Queen placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hn? What's wrong?"

"There's someone coming through there." Queen said, as she looked ahead towards the canyon.

Hunter began growling ferociously as he moved over in front of the three children to protect them. He sensed it not to be a good thing at all.

Desperado took that in note, as he too watched to see what would come of things.

Everyone's eyes were peeled on the canyon's entrance, and soon, they would see someone walk out of it. As it turned out, it was a male lion, which, as Jill would notice, had an uncanny resemblance to Jack, except for the fact that he seemed a lot more serious. "...you finally made it."

Seeing the lion, Bliss gasped. "Johnny!" she called, as she waved to the lion. "Like, you're still alive! Oh my gosh, you, like, had me SO worried!"

Jill was scared how much the lion looked like Jack. Deep down, she had a good feeling that the horrible things about to happen would be done by this…Johnny. It made her imagine Jack doing such a thing, which brought another shudder to her shoulders.

Now Hunter was barking at Johnny, having to be held back by Desperado like he was on a leash.

"What's wrong with you, Hunter?" Desperado asked, even if he knew he wouldn't get an answer.

"...is that Hunter?" Johnny asked, as he couldn't help but chuckle. "Man, of all the people I know..."

"So... we ten are the only ones left." Queen said, as she gave Hunter a brief glance, before looking back at Johnny. "What were you doing there, anyway?"

"I was about to go to the goal, when I heard you people back here." Johnny shrugged, before he folded his arms. "Of course, King and Queen are still alive."

"What did you expect?" King said with a grin, as he walked ahead of the group. "Well, let's go! We've got a goal to get to!"

"Actually..." Johnny began, as he looked at King. "...there's something you all should know."

"And what would that be, Johnny?" Desperado asked suspiciously.

"You see... I've been told that only two can get to the goal." Johnny said, as he shrugged. "And, as it turns out, I'm one of them."

"What?" Sage said, as she looked at Johnny in surprise. "What did you say?"

"Like, are you serious?" Bliss asked, as she tilted her head. "We're, like, ten people! Why can we, like, all go to the goal?"

"Furthermore..." Johnny continued, as he cracked his neck, looking at the group with a cold look. "...I was told specifically to only let one other person get past me. The rest is to be killed."

"You two timing, sniveling little weasel," Desperado growled. Then he released Hunter. "Go get your dinner, boy," he called, as Hunter charged after Johnny.

"BASTARD!" Hunter screamed; making one curious how that was still part of his vocabulary. Anyhow, Hunter took his two fists and attempted to pound Johnny into the ground.

However, the moment Hunter slammed his fists down on Johnny, the lion simply raised his own fists, making them connect with the werewolf's. Then, in a surprising turn of events, Johnny pushed away the much-larger Hunter, before scoffing. "Come on; is that all you have?"

Jill gasped seeing this.

Desperado growled. In a split second, he retracted into his shell and hurled himself toward the lion. Noticing this, Hunter jumped out of the way.

However, when Desperado got close enough, Johnny just jumped over the incoming shell, landing safely on the ground, as he looked at the other agents.

"Wait..." Queen uttered, as she glanced at Miser. "...you said that the rest would be killed. So does that mean..."

"Aah, you catch on quick, Queen." Johnny said with a chuckle, before he looked down at Miser, who inched her way behind King. "Now, don't you worry; you can go right through, and I won't stop you, Miser."

"TRAITOR!" screamed Hunter.

Meanwhile, Desperado looked over at Miser. "Go ahead Miser," he said. He figured that if she really was free to go, then let her; she shouldn't be subjected to what would happen here.

Miser looked from Desperado, to Johnny, before she hid behind Queen. "...no. I don't want to go." she said, as she looked at Johnny. "I don't want to leave my friends behind!"

"Oh, the hell with this!" King yelled, as he shot a bolt of lightning at Johnny, but somehow, it was pulled away from him, instead hitting Bliss. "What?"

"...Bliss. I do have to thank you, for staying alive." Johnny said, as he looked at the sheep with a grin. "Thanks to you, I don't need to worry about King at all."

Hearing that shocked Bliss, as she actually stepped away from Johnny, looking at him in horror. "...like, what are you saying?" she uttered.

"Your wool is the optimal lightning rod, Bliss." Johnny said, as he chuckled, pressing his fingers against his temples. "Whenever King will attempt to fire electricity at me, it'll go straight towards you. Too bad that it doesn't kill you; it would have spared me more work."

Desperado glanced at Bliss. *To think, she'd be betrayed by her own boyfriend,* he thought.

Hunter growled, and then he glanced up at the full moon above. For a moment, he stared at it. Then he closed his eyes. "...you know Johnny, I don't know why you're doing this," he suddenly spoke, and even with the grizzly tone, it sounded like Hunter. "But I will say that your acts won't be any more despicable than Prowler's or the others. They ended up in hell, and so will you!" With that, Hunter charged at Johnny again, but to snap at him with his teeth.

Desperado was stunned. "Did he...?"

So was Jill. "How did he...?"

However, before Hunter could grab Johnny, the lion quickly spun around, cupping his fists together, before slamming them into the werewolf, actually knocking the wolf away. "Please. You're starting to remind me of Sprinter, the fool."

"Sprinter?" Queen uttered, as she looked at Johnny. "...then you killed him."

"He was planning on finding an alternate route, so you wouldn't have to go through the canyon." Johnny shrugged, as he began walking towards the group, grinning. "I couldn't have that, could I?"

"So you're saying there IS an alternate route?" Desperado asked.

"Not any official ones." Johnny replied, as he cracked his neck. "He intended to take a mountain-route, going the completely opposite direction of the canyon, which would lead to freedom... but it's a little too late to turn back now."

"We'll see about that." Sage said, as her eyes suddenly glowed, but despite that, Johnny continued walking towards them, undeterred. "...what? He's immune?"

"Oh, I have my superiors to thank for that." Johnny said, as he tapped the side of his head with a smirk. "Mental implants. In case you would survive, Sage."

"Thought of everything, have you?" Desperado said with folded arms.

Then all of a sudden, they felt a minor tremor in the ground. Hunter was seen raising his strong arms, with telekinetic energy oozing around him. The very earth itself was coming off the ground.

"Cheapskate," Hunter muttered under a growl, just as he intended to crush Johnny with the contents of the earth.

As the slab of ground was about to hit him, however, Johnny easily leapt out of the way, before breaking into a run, towards the group. "Don't worry, Miser; I'll be done with the riff-raff soon enough!"

"Like, stop!" Just then, Bliss stood in front of the others, blocking

Johnny from them, which actually made the lion stop. "We have, like, no reason to do this! We can all just forget about this, and go to the goal! Right?"

"...dear, sweet Bliss." Johnny mused, as he walked towards the sheep. "...GUN wouldn't like that." Then, when he got close enough, he furiously swung his arm at Bliss, sending her flying right towards the pond.

"!" Strangely enough, Desperado was affected by that. One moment he was silent, and then, "...Bliss!" He attempted to run off after her.

Then Hunter blocked his way. "We have more important things to worry about now!" the werewolf told the turtle.

"He's right." Johnny said with a chuckle, as he began approaching the bigger group again. "You'll have to try and survive... but that's just not going to happen."

"We'll see about that." Queen said, as she quickly vanished, before reappearing right behind Johnny. Before the lion could register that, Queen viciously slammed her fist into him, sending him flying away from the group.

"Yeah! Go, Queen!" King cheered, as the kids joined in with the cheer. "Go and kick his ass!"

However, when Johnny landed, he simply got up, wiping some blood off his lips. "...I barely felt that one." he said sinisterly.

Jill shook. It just was so creepy imagining Jack acting that way.

"But at least it hit this time!" Hunter said.

Desperado clenched his own fists. "...she didn't deserve that, you know!" he suddenly yelled, hurling his spinning shell right at Johnny again.

"Huh? I thought Desperado didn't like Bliss," Jill remarked.

"He found her annoying, but he didn't hate her." Sage responded, as she sighed.

When Desperado spun towards Johnny, however, the lion ducked underneath the shell, and with split-second timing, aimed a kick at Desperado, in order to propel him into the air.

"Desperado!" Queen called, as she quickly rushed Johnny, reeling her fist back for a punch. "You no-good coward!"

"Am I?" Johnny said eerily, as he evaded Queen's attack. "Well, that's just a damn shame, isn't it?"

While Johnny was occupied, King and Sage rushed over to Bliss, who seemed to be knocked out completely. "Damn it... she's breathing, at least." King muttered, as he carefully placed a hand on her. "Hang on, I'll wake her up."

In landed Desperado next to the three of them, landing hard enough that his shell cracked a tad. "D-Damn that...jungle cat," he muttered, trying to get up.

"Tsch... we gotta think of some way to beat him down." King muttered, as he sent electricity through Bliss' body, which woke her up. "But he's even holding Queen at bay... this could get ugly."

"But what can we do?" Sage mused, as she watched Johnny and Queen trade blows. "He's immune to my powers, and as long as Bliss is here, you can't do anything to him."

"Hey..." Bliss uttered, as she looked up at King. "...like, I have... an idea..."

Desperado got up limping to them, and then he looked at Bliss. "What's your plan?" he asked.

"Just, like... get me up." Bliss said, as King quickly got her on her feet.

"What are you planning?" Sage asked, as Bliss glared at the fight; Johnny still hadn't noticed her waking up.

"...listen. Like, I don't want you to miss me too much, you hear? You have to, like, move on... but it's been fun!" Then, she immediately ran right towards the fight, as Johnny conveniently enough had his

back to them.

"You can't win, Queen." Johnny chuckled, as he backed away from another swipe from the bear. "You may have the speed, but you're simply too weak to properly damage-" All of a sudden, from behind him, Bliss grabbed hold of him. "What?"

"Surprise, honey." Bliss said, as she glanced behind her. "King, fire it up!"

"Eh?" King uttered, as he looked at the sheep cluelessly. "...alright, I guess?" he said, before firing bolts of electricity out, and predictably enough, it shot right at Bliss, being absorbed by her wool.

"BLISS!" Desperado screamed, well...desperately.

"...what are you trying to prove?" Johnny said, as he glanced back at Bliss, who was still receiving excessive amounts of electricity. "If you plan to have King kill me, you're going by it the wrong way."

"Oh, no..." Bliss uttered, as she smirked. "Like, I'm doing it the right way! Sage, make a splash!"

"Make a what?" Sage uttered, as she suddenly realized what Bliss' plan was. "You're not seriously considering-"

"I'm, like, totally determined here! So, like, do it, already!" Bliss called back. "Just hurry! I can't, like, hold him forever!"

"...forgive me, Bliss!" Sage responded, as she quickly glared back at the pond, just as a large amount of water floated up, before rocketing right towards Johnny and Bliss.

"You wouldn't..." Johnny uttered, as he glared at Bliss.

"Heh... see ya in hell, Johnny!" At that point, the water immediately struck the two, and with the massive amount of electricity in Bliss' body, both of them were being electrocuted, with Bliss screaming in unimaginable pain from this method.

Jill finally turned away from it as it happened. She had already seen so much that she couldn't really take it anymore.

It felt like an eternity before Bliss' screams eventually died out, and both her and Johnny collapsed. While they hadn't been disfigured in any form, one look at Bliss could instantly tell the group that she was dead.

"...no..." Queen uttered, as she collapsed on her knees. "She... sacrificed herself..."

Jill looked back, and tears squeezed themselves out of her eyes, but she still kept herself from losing it as she watched.

"...damn..." King muttered, as he looked into the ground. "Why did she..."

Sage wanted to say something, but she quickly noticed how utterly distraught Wiper, Miser and Ripper looked, as a result of Bliss' death. Closing her eyes, she drew them towards her with her powers, before giving them a comforting hug.

"...Please tell me that's it," Jill pleaded, looking at the present Sage. "I don't want to watch anymore..."

Sage glanced at Jill, before looking back at the scene. "...sorry." she said, as she closed her eyes. "But it isn't over yet."

At that point, they heard something slam into the ground, along with some heavy breathing. Hearing that made Queen actually back away in horror. "No... no way... he's..."

"Ungh... that stung." As it turned out, Johnny was still alive, in spite of having been so thoroughly electrocuted. With a growl, he got to his feet, before looking down at Bliss' body. "...clever girl... but it didn't help, did it?"

"No!" Jill cried.

There was a roar of rage, and next thing Johnny knew, he was pinned in a chokehold by Desperado. The grip proceeded to tighten in order to try and choke him. "WHY DON'T YOU DIE?" he screamed.

"Kkh..." Johnny didn't answer, as it seemed like he was most

definitely being choked... and then he began laughing. He didn't even try to escape Desperado's grip; he just looked at the turtle, and laughed. "I wouldn't want to go before any of you!" he said, before grabbing hold of Desperado's arm, slowly crushing it in his own grip.

"No way..." Miser uttered, as the kids tried hiding beneath Sage's wings. "He's... he's a monster..."

Growling, King suddenly ran towards Johnny and Desperado. "Yo, Desperado! Get outta the way!" he called, as he reeled his own fist back, while it was coated with electricity.

Desperado turned to see him, and jumped at the last minute; holding the arm that had now been crushed by Johnny.

"YAAAAAHH!" Just as Desperado got out of the way, King punched Johnny directly in the face, sending a hail of electricity through the lion's body. "Go to hell!"

"...you first, King." Johnny said, as he continued laughing, just as King realized something; the punch hadn't budged the lion at all. He still stood perfectly in place, even with several volts of electricity coursing through his body.

"...no way..." King uttered, as he stepped away from the lion. "What are you made of?"

"What's wrong, King? Don't tell me that you're done, already?" Johnny said, as he began walking towards the tiger. "Bliss' attack was ten times stronger than that! You won't let yourself be outclassed by that bimbo, would you?"

That did it. With a roar, King immediately unleashed an intense storm of lightning, all directed at Johnny. "DON'T YOU TALK ABOUT HER LIKE THAT!" he screamed.

But even then, Johnny kept moving towards him, laughing. "That's it! Give it all you got! It'll make me killing you seem much more intense!" he laughed, as he reeled his own fist back for a punch, with an absolutely sadistic look on his face.

Desperado now realized that he too aught to sacrifice something to

defeat this maniac. To save King, he jumped in the way of the punch instead, intending to shield with his shell; though part of him had a feeling that Johnny would deliver a devastating blow.

Just at that point, Johnny threw his fist forward.

It seemed like Desperado's shell was nothing more than a rice cracker, as Johnny's punch had gone right through the turtle, stopping just a bit short from getting in contact with King. Seeing the turtle having stepped in like that, King stopped his assault. "D-Desperado!"

"Ooh... how noble..." Johnny said, as he grinned. "But all for nothing." he added, before pulling his fist out of the turtle.

Desperado stumbled back weakly. His entire shell now shattered onto the ground, leaving him naked and revealing the gruesome hole in his stomach....

...however, somehow, the turtle was still standing.

"...G-go ahead," he muttered. "...come at me ag-gain, Johnny..."

"...what?" Jill was baffled by his act.

"...Desperado?" King uttered, as he backed away from the turtle. "Wha-what are you-"

"Still alive, huh?" Johnny said, as he clenched his hands into fists. "Not for long!" Then, he began mercilessly pounding Desperado, not giving the turtle any chance of effectively countering.

"Desperado, no!" Queen called, as she got on her feet. "Y-you don't have to do this!"

Desperado took the blows bravely, and in the meantime, he had something hidden behind his back. When the opportunity arose, he whipped it out. It was a piece of shell that looked sharp enough to be used as a dagger. Without another moment to spare, the turtle ran that piece right through Johnny's heart, stabbing him thoroughly..

"...I-if I'm going to hell," he growled, "then I'm t-taking you w-with me

you son of a bitch.

"At that point, it seemed like Johnny really was a goner, as he stumbled a bit back from this attack. "...kkh... that... all... you... got...?" he uttered weakly, as he looked at Desperado with a terrifying grin. "Didn't... even... feel... a-"

Johnny stopped, as he noticed something above Desperado, headed right his way. "JUST DIE!" Wiper screamed, as he had leapt towards the lion, and with Desperado having weakened the lion so thoroughly, he was powerless to evade Wiper's attack; namely, jutting the tip of his hand right through Johnny's head, right between the eyes.

"...argh..." That finally clinched it. Both Desperado's and Wiper's attacks were too much for the lion, as he collapsed to the ground. This time, he really was dead, but the grin didn't fade away.

"...f-finally," the turtle uttered. Then he finally collapsed himself.

"Desperado!" Hunter cried, running to him.

As did the other agents, quickly rushing to the turtle's side. "Desperado..." King uttered, as he was on the verge of tears. "You idiot... you didn't have to do that!" he said, as he desperately tried not to cry.

"Please don't die, Desperado!" Miser pleaded, as she took hold of the turtle's hand. "I... I don't want to lose you! Please, don't..."

Desperado gave Miser a sweet smile. "You guys….have to survive," he said. "No matter what." at this moment, his head fell onto the ground.

Desperado was dead.

"That's enough!" Jill uttered, trying to keep herself from crying again. "I've seen enough!"

"...well, it's pretty much the end of it, there." Sage said, as the scene began fading away, before she and Jill found themselves back in the HQ. "I'm sorry that you had to sit through that..."

Jill was silent, trembling.

"...Jill?" Sage uttered, as she looked at the ewe. "...if there's something on your mind... you can tell me."

"…I-I think I just need some fresh air," uttered Jill weakly, but instead of remaining calm about it she ran out the door in the process of suddenly bumping shoulders with Brick when he walked inside. It startled him, and when he caught a glimpse of her he thought he saw her crying.

"Brownie?" he cried, watching Jill running outside towards the woods.

Jill just kept running. She ran through the woods, and kept running for a long time, until she could no longer run, ending up in the middle of nowhere she recognized and so far away from the HQ. Falling onto her butt near the trunk of a tree, she saw a tear hit the ground beside her legs. Then before she knew it, she broke into heartfelt sobs, digging her face in her knees as she held them.

It was her fault. First of all, she never knew just what they went through, and now that she did, she realized how terrible it was that Ripper was now under Callous' control.

It was her fault, because she didn't stop it; she *couldn't* stop it. Jill was not strong enough to stop all these terrible things happening. It was bringing back that traumatic memory of how she failed to save her burning village. All that guilt…

It was all her fault.

That, combined with the stress of the horrors she had seen, was enough to break her down into tears.

Chapter 34

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"...hey." As Jill cried, however, she'd eventually see someone standing right over her; namely, King. "Why are you crying?" he asked.

Jill sniffled while she looked up at him. "…I'm so sorry King. It's my entire fault that Ripper was taken by Callous," she said. "She's my responsibility because of what she is, but I'm not strong enough to stop her. It's just like when my village was burning down and I couldn't stop it. It's my fault." Then she broke out into another sob.

"...what's that supposed to mean?" King asked, as he sat down by Jill, looking at her. "You weren't the one who took Noon away... it was Callous, right? Ya can't blame yourself just because you couldn't stop something. It makes life hell... and believe me, I know the feeling."

"…but I wish I could've stopped it," Jill said, wiping her eyes. "I know I have the power to, but…I don't know how to use that power correctly. The minute I'm exhausted, she takes that advantage to get away with horrible things while I can't stop her."

At that point, King gave her a light tap on the head. "Well, if you think that's a problem... then beating yourself over the head with it isn't gonna solve it. If ya wanna become stronger, then get stronger. Crying over it doesn't help in that department."

"…you're right," Jill said, calming down now. "I was overwhelmed…" Considering King's words, she thought about it.

"Overwhelmed?" King inquired, as he tilted his head. "Did something happen after I left?"

"Well…" part of her wasn't sure she should say this, but she wasn't one to be dishonest. "…Sage showed me a memory of a massacre…and I realized how horrible it was for you. It made me

think that I shouldn't have been so loose with words when I talked about Ripper, and it just made me feel even guiltier that he was under Callous' control…"

"...she showed you, huh..." King muttered, before he sighed. "Well, guess I gotta apologize, too. I doubt she'd have shown you that memory, if I hadn't acted up..."

"Yeah…you had friends to cope with the hard times…" Jill said weakly. "I was all alone."

"...listen up." King said, as he looked at Jill seriously. "What happened back then might have been awful... but that's part of the past. I know that it's hard to forget about stuff like that..." Then, he stood up. "...but you can't let your past keep haunting you. In the end, it'll drive ya crazy."

"I know," Jill said, attempting a smile. "That's what my friends are trying to teach me."

"That's great." King said, as he held out a hand to her, to help her on her feet. "Now stand up; no sense in just moping around here, right?"

Jill took his hand and rose to her feet with his help. "Right," she said. "And maybe I'll take your advice; you know, about getting stronger." Letting his hand go, she looked off through the forest with glazed eyes. "I think I'll leave."

"Got it." King nodded, as he glanced at the woods as well. "...you know, I think I finally got a name for my warrior nation."

"Really?" Jill asked, curiously looking back at him. "What is it?"

"...Safe Haven." King responded, as he folded his arms. "Because that's what I intend it to be, for those who would stay there."

"…Interesting…" Jill muttered. Even with the horrible past of theirs that she had witnessed, she still wasn't going to change her opinion about his warrior nation being a bad idea. She just shrugged, however, and then turned to King. "Maybe you guys can stay at the Chaotix HQ," she said. "My friends were planning to move back to

our home; the Clubhouse. It'll open up the vacancy at the HQ."

"Maybe so." King shrugged, as he began walking through the woods. "Well, see you around! I'll need to see if I can't find Miser; I think she might have gotten lost while looking for me!"

"See ya!" Jill waved. Once King was gone, Jill took out the communicator that Wiper had given her earlier. "Well, I don't know what he'll do now that there's no more Corruption in him," she muttered. "But I can still get some use out of it."

She wanted to leave her friends and train with Metal, only for awhile. She figured that if she wasn't there with them, then they won't get involved with all the things that are happening; that and she could use so much more training.

"I'd better talk to Metal," she mumbled, putting the communicator away and walking through the woods to the presumed direction the spring was; hoping that Metal was still there.

Eventually, she'd come across the spring, where Metal was still sitting in the same position he had been in when she left earlier. " *Someone's early.* " he noted, without looking at her.

"Well, sadly there was another change in plans," Jill said. "I won't be going with my friends when they go back to the Clubhouse."

" *...you won't?* " Metal inquired, as he glanced back at Jill. " *Why is that?* "

"I want to take advantage of the time there is left before things start happening," she said. "So I was hoping I could train full time…if that's alright with you?"

" *...I don't see why not.* " Metal said with a shrug, as he stood up. " *But I had planned on going back to Westopolis, just to check up on Calculate; but, nothing that making a copy of myself wouldn't solve.* "

"You wouldn't have to make a copy; we could just meet up here in the morning and start the training from there," Jill said.

" *True, true...* " Metal muttered, as he glanced at Jill. " *But I'll have to*

warn you; I'm no good guy. My methods will be brutal, and there won't be much time for rest. If you're willing to do this, you'd better be prepared. "

"I know," Jill said. "That's why I trust your training will be the most efficient."

" *Good enough.* " Metal said, as he looked at the sky. " *...well, we can start training later. For now, I'll have to return to Westopolis.* " he said, before glancing at Jill. " *Go home and rest up; tomorrow, you'll enter hell.* " Then, he took to the sky, quickly blasting off from the scene.

Jill watched as Metal left, and as she did, she took a deep breath. What he said would definitely NOT be an understatement; even a literal term to set what the training will be.

But she had been through hell before; she knew she could do it again.

Once Metal was gone, Jill turned around and headed back toward the HQ in a sprint. She would now have to tell everyone about this, leaving out the part about Metal of course, and get ready to say her goodbyes in the morning.

Some might not even find it as a good idea.

Like Brick, for instance, once she had told him and many others about her leaving for training. "Brownie, are you sure?" Brick asked her worriedly. "I mean, you'll be out there alone…what if Callous—"

Jill put her hands on his shoulders. "I'm not worried about Callous. What I need to do is get my act together so that I can be prepared for the future."

"But Jill!" protested Striker. "I thought you were coming with us back to the Clubhouse!"

"Yeah, I wanted to come back to the Clubhouse too guys," Jill said. "But being a grown-up is about giving up what you want to do for the things you need to do."

"Chao!" Even Buddy seemed to object to it.

"But... but you don't have to do it on your own!" Jack protested. "You could have someone come along with you, right?"

"Yeah, like Wiper, y'know!" Newt shot in, as he looked at Jill. "Just give him a few days, and he can come with, y'know!"

"Personally..." Natal began, as she looked at Jill. "...I think Jill would do better, training on her own."

"Natal's right," Boomer agreed.

Jill knew she wasn't alone in her training, but she'd never tell them who the mentor was. "Wiper gave me a communicator, so we'll still keep in touch," she said. "Ani's probably going to remain here at HQ so that Hunter can be with her."

"That sounds reasonable," Charmy said. "I still say you guys aren't a burden, but I don't mind having Wiper and his friends stay here, although that leaves Newt and Natal to be questioned." On that note, he turned to the frog and salamander. "What will you two do? Do you wish to stay with your team mate, or leave with the children back to their tree house?" Charmy knew that Natal had grown fond of the kids, while at the same time, there was the thing between Boomer and Newt.

"Well, someone's gotta look after Wiper, right?" Newt said, as he looked at Charmy. "I can stay here, y'know."

"...I think I'll go with them." Natal said, as she glanced at the kids. "I do want to see the Clubhouse... but I may pop come back here, to check on Wiper."

"Proxy, you're coming with us too, right?" Milo asked, looking at the android.

"I'll come with you," Proxy said with a nod. "I have a lot to catch up on, after all."

"Oh, and what about Captain Whisker?" Striker added.

"I think I`ll come wi' th' kids as well. Gotta be seein' how fancy th' clubhouse be, right?" Whisker said, as he gave the kids a nod.

"What about me?" Rudy asked. "I don't know if I want to stay here or go to the Clubhouse with everybody…"

Charmy smiled at the little kangaroo. "You're free to go to the Clubhouse if you wish, Rudy," he said.

"REALLY?" Rudy then jumped for joy. "Woohoo!"

"But this isn't until tomorrow morning, right?" Milo asked.

"Right," Jill said. "I won't leave until tomorrow morning as well, so I'll still be here for tonight."

"Then... we can still spend some time together, right?" Jack said, as he looked at Jill. "So... can we all play hide and seek together?"

Jill didn't answer right away. She had glanced at Jack and suddenly got the image of Johnny in the back of her mind, but she shook it off. Then she smiled at the lion. "Of course we can play," she said.

"Cool!" exclaimed Striker, who grabbed Jill's hand as did Milo. Then the two of them dragged Jill off. "C'mon Jack!"

"Yeah! Play-time!" Jack laughed, as he followed the three.

"...I suppose we should start packing what we brought along." Tails said, as he gave Brick a nod. "The sooner we do that, the more free time we'll have later today."

"Yeah," Brick uttered quietly. It was likely that Brick would be a bit… depressed at the thought that Jill had to leave.

In the meantime of all the events that happened today, Brick had gotten to know Jill's dad fairly well. He was a pretty good guy, (and Brick visited with him long enough to be convinced that Ray wouldn't be bent on his demise should Brick hurt Jill in any way, shape or form.) To this, Ray was in approval of the relationship between them.

While Brick knew that he personally would miss her more than anyone would know, he wondered what her father's reaction to her leaving would be, as he followed Tails to pack things up.

Soon enough, Metal had returned to Westopolis, casually entering one of the buildings that were connected to his facility. " *Calculate, I'm back.* " he transmitted to his subordinate, as the place immediately went online, with doors opening, computers starting up, just like before he had left.

At first, there wasn't a response. Then there was some muttering. "…huh?"

" *I said,* " Metal began, as he kept himself from groaning, " *I'm back. I've returned, I'm home, whatever you want to call it.* "

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was recharging." Finally, a door shifted open and Cal himself walked into Metal's presence. "That was quick. I thought you said you'd be gone a few days."

" *Oh, I'll still be.* " Metal said, as he glanced at Calculate. " *I just wanted to make sure that no one had made any... intrusions, while I was gone.* "

Cal looked thoughtful, and then he shook his head. "No, I went offline to recharge the moment you left. Everything should've stayed intact as far as I'm concerned."

" *Good, good...* " Metal said, as he placed a hand on Cal's shoulder. " *...but I'm still a bit iffy, you know, regarding you and Callous. I don't want to take any chance of her taking advantage of you, or this place, while I'm gone.* "

"I haven't seen her yet," Cal said.

But I'm sure you'd like *to see her…*

That arguing voice in his head again. Just what in the world was that about? Cal touched his head. "…and I hope that she doesn't do something of the sort when you take off again," he added; mostly in assurance of himself.

Sure…

He hoped it would stop after recharging…

" *Hoping isn't going to be good enough, Calculate.* " Metal said, as he folded his arms. " *Therefore, we need to find some solution, so that you won't give in to your desires... because if I have to sit through another hour of you two getting it on like bunnies, then someone's getting their head cut off.* "

Cal sure didn't appreciate the way Metal illustrated that, but he nodded in agreement. "Would you have an idea?" he asked.

"There is one way, though I doubt that you'll find it comfortable in the least." Metal said, as he looked Cal in the eye. *"Simply put, we shut off the part of your brain that has those cravings. That way, you'll act more rational."*

"Hm," Callous hummed thoughtfully, rubbing his chin with a thumb. Truthfully, he was willing to do anything as long as he could escape Callous, but he wondered if doing that would be dangerous to his mental health.

Why bother? You'll still crawl right back to her in the end...

Shut it, Cal responded to the other thought in his head. "Well, I'm willing to try it," he said. *Just as long as the other thoughts cease...* he thought.

"In that case, let's get started." Metal said, as he led Cal down the hall. *"Now, even after I've shut that part of your brain off, that's no guarantee. So, when I'm gone, I honestly want you to get out of Westopolis until I return. Try looking for a Chaos Emerald, or something, to keep you occupied."*

I'd put more emphasis on that 'no guarantee'...

Why don't you go bug someone else's brain? Cal thought. "Sure, why not?" he responded, wanting to make sure that Metal knew he was listening.

"Good." Metal said, just as they entered a room; namely, the same

room Metal had extracted data from Cal's mind earlier. *"And do make sure that you stay far, far, far, far, FAR away from Westopolis. I don't care how far it is, but as long as it's too far for Callous to just grab you and crawl into here, I'll be satisfied."* Then, he motioned towards the metal bed. *"Just have a seat."*

Cal took his seat and laid on the metal bed.

Wow, he really despises Callous, doesn't he?

He has reason to. She tried to manipulate him, Cal thought. *In fact, I think he'll take a look at my brainwaves and know that something's up; maybe removing the constant argument I keep having in my head.*

Hate to burst your bubble, but he won't find anything. You know why?

There was silence.

I AM you, you nitwit, I'M YOU! That means the brainwaves aren't going to be different...

We'll see about that, Cal thought, though uneasily now; wondering if that was true.

Just as Cal laid down, wires came down from the ceiling, jutting themselves into Cal's head, like before.

"Alright, now... accessing..." Metal muttered, as he sat down by the monitor, watching over different statistics and the like. *"Alright... entering part of your brain which controls your lust... hold your breath, this might sting just a bit."* he said, as he pressed one button. *"Shutting down..."*

Cal clenched his teeth; it was somewhat painful, but at the same time it felt really weird. He was just somewhat baffled that Metal didn't detect any unusual occurrences in his brainwave pattern.

He expected to hear boasting in his mind...but the other end of it was silent.

Cal relaxed at that point when he realized he didn't hear that voice anymore.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Metal said, as he closed his eyes. *"...just to be on the safe side, I'll have to see if security cameras detected anything while I was gone. Just hang on; I'll remove those wires afterwards."* Then, he accessed the security feed, whilst the wires remained in Cal's head for the time being.

Meanwhile, Cal was still listened carefully for that voice in his head. *Is it gone?* he thought.

...no reply.

Cal let out a sigh of relief as his head hit back on the table. It seemed like they were shut off along with that part of his brain, for now.

"Mhm... nothing of any importance happened," Metal eventually said, when the wires in Cal's head were removed, elevated back up to the ceiling. *"So, Cal, how are we feeling?"*

"Somewhat relieved, and a little more relaxed," Cal said, sitting up from where he was lying down.

"That's good to hear," Metal said, as he approached Cal. *"By shutting off that particular part of your brain, you'll easily overcome Callous' advances."* Then, he turned away from the monkey. *"By the way... is there something you'd like to share with me?"*

"Hm?" Cal cocked his head. He could share about the voices in his head, but now that they're gone...

...no, he shouldn't be that ignorant. "Why do you ask?" although he did wonder if Metal had observed anything strange about him.

"Oh, just looking out for you," Metal shrugged. *"You were, after all, completely entranced by her. I have to wonder if it brought any negative side-effects..."*

"There *was* something actually," Cal said, touching his head, "but whatever it was, it was gone when you shut down part of my brain."

"...Really?" Metal mused, as he turned to face Cal. *"And what was this "something" you speak of? We can't exactly keep secrets, can we? Especially with someone like Callous loose."*

"...Don't call me crazy," Cal muttered quietly, looking back and forth as if he was being watched, "but I heard my own thoughts arguing with me; like there was someone else in my head."

"...is that so?" Metal mused, as he nodded a few times. *"And just what did your conflicting thoughts have to say?"*

"Things you wouldn't want me to repeat, believe me," Cal groaned. "Mostly...it was geared toward my lust."

"Hrm, I see..." Metal nodded. *"Well, good thing that we shut that part of your brain off. As an android, you shouldn't bother with such things to begin with."* Then, he glanced back at Cal. *"Now, before I leave, I want to see you depart; I won't risk Callous jumping you here while I'm gone."*

Cal then headed for the door. "Alright. I'll go ahead and track down another emerald then," he said, leaving out the door. *Good riddance...I was starting to get a headache from all that going on in my head,* he thought.

Somehow, a slight chill ran up his spine though. It was so subtle, however that Cal simply ignored it and headed outside.

As Cal headed outside, Metal watched as he left. ...well, Jill won't expect me until morning comes. he thought, as he turned around. I should study up a bit, before I leave...

"Oh Meeeeeeetaaaaaaaal..." spoke a dreaded voice in a sing-song tone that Metal would hope he wouldn't have to hear right now. "Have I successfully annoyed you to a point where you despise my very being, yet?"

"Actually, you are mistaken." Metal said, restraining a sigh. *"I already despise you to your very being... but it's not from your*

pestering, that's for sure."

"Kekekekekeke..." a distorted voice chuckled. "An attempt at humor. How delightfully charming."

"...another one of your conquests, Callous?" Metal replied, as he finally turned around.

"Sure, you can call it that if you want." Callous was perched up high in the darkness of the ceiling, but it was only a moment before she was on the ground on her feet.

And when she landed, she did so right next to Ripper, whose eyes seemed to be more droopy than usual. "Kekekekeke... we're humbled to meet you." he said, as the blades moved about erratically.

"...quite." Metal scoffed, before he glanced at Callous. *"Now, what do you want?"*

"I've been watching you Metal," she said with a chuckle. "How cute that you think working together with my baby sister will defeat me...I'm touched that you two could settle your differences for me."

"It's only a temporary alliance," Metal said, as he folded his arms, before chuckling. *"Besides, I don't think that you should call her your "baby sister"... after all, you're the younger one of the two."*

"Kekekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as his blades moved in accordance with his laughter, as if they were laughing along with him. "...he has wit."

"Now you're standing up for her. Cute, real cute..." Callous said; though she wasn't amused by that comment Metal made. "Anyhow, I figure I can make things more interesting, as usual. How about a bet?"

"I don't usually make bets." Metal said, as he looked at Callous curiously. *"But do tell me what you have in mind; I might actually be interested."*

Callous smirked. "Let's say, I give you..." she paused to

contemplate, counting on her fingers. "...five days," she said, holding up that many fingers. "I'll give you five days to train her. Then I'll come for her on the sixth day, and we'll fight. If she wins, then she has the right to claim the part of her soul I was constructed from, which will mean I will cease to exist. However, if I stand out on top..." then she let out a devious chuckle. "Well, you can image what will happen, since I'm sure you figured out my plan by now."

"Aah, yes, I figured that out this morning." Metal said, as he waggled his finger at Callous. *"And just for the record, I don't appreciate you taking advantage of my subordinates without my consent."* Then, he nodded. *"Well, it sounds like a fair deal... but I only accept on one condition."* Then, he looked sternly at her. *"You must battle with me as witness. I don't want you dragging her into darkness for a cheap victory while I'm not looking."*

"Aw, you're such a spoilsport," Callous teased. "But nevertheless, I agree to the terms. See you in a week," she said, turning as she would leave. Then she stopped. "I'll even throw in a word of advice," she said. Holding up her hand, a black flame ignited, burning above her palm. "I'd start with her deepest fears first," she chuckled. "I hear she isn't too hot about fire..."

Then she extinguished the black flame, disappearing into a black hole in the ground. "Come along, Ripper."

"...kekekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he glanced at Metal, who merely looked impassively at the mantis. "...just admit defeat... you can't stop the Master's awakening..." he said, before following Callous into the dark hole.

"...that was kind of her." Metal mused once the dark hole faded away. *"Why bother giving me a hint? Does she really think that she can win, regardless?"* Then, he scoffed. *"No matter; I need to study up, before I go back to training Jill..."* Then, he walked down the halls, eyes closed. *Alright, Goddess... let's see if your daughter has what it takes.*

It was now nighttime, and after dinner. Jill had only a few hours left before bedtime, where she could spend it with her friends. She had a good feeling that she may not see them for a long while, and there

was a small sadness in her heart.

She was going to miss them a lot.

"Hey." As she was thinking, she'd hear a familiar voice behind her, and turning around, she'd find it to be Wiper, already out of bed. "I... still haven't thanked you, for earlier..." he began, as he scratched the back of his head.

"Oh, it was no problem," she said; even if that was far from the truth. "Are you okay now?"

"I... feel a lot better, now." Wiper nodded, as he looked away from Jill. "...so, I heard you were leaving?"

"Yeah, I'm going off to train," Jill said. Then she remembered something. "I don't know what your plans are, but those communicators could come in handy after all. I'm sure I'll want to keep in touch with everyone while I'm gone..."

"...I'm really not sure on what I'm thinking of doing, now." Wiper said, as he closed his eyes. "I doubt that I'm in good enough condition to follow you, so I'll probably stay here for the time being..."

Jill looked up at Wiper. The memory of that massacre went through her head again; seeing that young, frightened Wiper. "All you need is some time to relax...that's all," she assured.

"...yeah, I suppose." Wiper said, as he gave Jill a nod. "I heard Natal say something about going with the kids to this place you call the Clubhouse... I could give her a communicator, so you could contact her and those over at the clubhouse as well."

Jill smiled. "I'm sure they'd really appreciate it." She turned and looked out her window thoughtfully. "...Wiper, for all that's happened to you, I want to offer you my sympathies and my apologies," she finally said.

Blinking, Wiper glanced at Jill curiously. "That was unexpected. What drove you to say that?" he asked, before hissing.

"Sage showed me something that happened when you were little,"

Jill said, without looking at him. "That, combined with what happened to you with the Corruption…I don't know. I just feel responsible even if I know that I'm not."

"...she did that, huh..." Wiper muttered, as he looked away from Jill. "...well, thanks. If it hadn't been for you, I'd probably be dead..." Then, he sighed. "No, I should apologize. I acted too confident around Callous, and... well, paid the price, I suppose."

"Don't worry about it; a lot of people have been a bit cocky around Callous, even me at one point," Jill said. Then for some reason, something she had said before popped into her head, and she uttered the words before she realized it. "I pledge loyalty to those who need my help, and that's why I feel responsible for all the bad things happening; because I failed to stop all these horrible things from happening."

Then she sighed herself. "That's why I'm going to train, so I CAN stop them; even *prevent* them from happening."

"...I see." Wiper nodded, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. "Best of luck to you, then." he said with a hiss.

"Thanks," Jill said. "You too."

Wiper couldn't help but smile a bit, before he let go of her shoulder. "Well, I should..." he began, when suddenly...

"Am I interrupting anything?" they'd hear Sage say, as she stood in the doorway now, looking at the two.

Jill glanced back at her. "Oh, Sage. No, you weren't interrupting."

"Ah, that's good to know." Sage replied, as she glanced at Wiper. "Feeling better, champ?"

"Yeah." Wiper said with a nod, before he headed out of the room. "See you around, Jill."

When Wiper was gone, Sage glanced over at Jill. "So, you're going off to train, huh? That leaves just me to try and help Ani out."

"Oh yeah, sorry about that," Jill muttered, realizing she forgot about that. "Do you think you could figure out what to do on your own?"

"I'll try." Sage said with a smile. "It might not be as easy without someone who knows a bit about Purity and Corruption around... but I'll try." Then, she snapped her fingers. "That's right; I forgot about it for a while." Then, she took out a white Chaos Emerald. "You might need this."

Jill looked at the Chaos Emerald in wonder, and then looked back at her. "Why are you giving this to me?" she asked.

"I figured that you could use it, for training." Sage said, as she handed the emerald to her. "And... well, I think I can trust you not to lose it."

"Thanks," Jill said, smiling at her as she hid away the emerald.

"Anytime." Sage replied, giving Jill a quick nod. "Well, I don't want to take up your time too much; you've got people to spend time with, right?" she said in a clever tone, before heading out.

"…right." Sure, it was too late to answer Sage, but Jill agreed to that. She stood up and walked out of her room, wandering down the hall.

"Well I have to say that I couldn't be prouder of you, Jillian."

"Dad?" Jill saw Ray appear behind her from another hall, smiling at her.

"You've grown up so much since I last saw you," he said. "You've matured considerably."

Jill blushed, "Dad, you're embarrassing me."

"Well I don't get the opportunity to do that, now do I?" Ray chuckled. "Anyhow, I heard about your leaving."

"Oh." Jill now started to feel guilty. She had forgotten to tell her Dad, and just when they finally saw each other again. "I'm sorry; I wanted to tell you but it slipped my mind."

"I understand," Ray said with a nod. "It sounds like you've been very busy lately."

"It's not just that, but…well, I haven't seen you in almost a year Dad," Jill said. "I should be spending more time with you…"

"Jillian, pumpkin," Ray said, setting a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "I understand. You're taking your responsibilities seriously, and I'm happier that you're doing that rather than dilly-dallying." Then he gave her a grin. "I even know there are some secrets you're hiding from me."

"…R-really?" Jill croaked.

"Yeah, but don't worry yourself over it, hon," Ray said. "You're allowed to have secrets of your own; even from your old man." Then he rubbed her head, ruffling her hair. "I should really get back to my own responsibilities myself, like watching over the village."

"Okay," Jill said.

Ray hugged her. "I'm glad that I got to see you again Jillian."

"Me too," Jill said, tightening the hug.

"And on a side note, make sure you don't let Brick walk all over you, you hear?"

"Dad!" Jill gasped, blushing wildly.

Ray laughed.

"...hey." Behind Jill, Queen was standing, as she looked at both her and Ray. "Jill, was it? Do you... have a minute to spare?"

Jill looked at Queen, and then at Ray.

"Go ahead honey," Ray said, giving Jill's forehead a kiss. Then he walked off.

"Yeah, what is it?" Jill asked, turning back to Queen.

"...well, I know that we might have gotten off on the wrong foot..." Queen began, as she looked away from Jill. "...but I just wanted to thank you; for saving Dawn."

"Oh," Again, the memory of the massacre passed the back of her mind, helping her understand Queen's thanks. "You're welcome," she said.

"..." Giving Jill a silent nod, Queen turned to walk away, but she didn't move at first. "...you're a noble warrior. Don't lose sight of your light." she said, before she walked off.

Jill appreciated the encouraging words; especially if they came from Queen. With that done, Jill continued down the hall to see who else she would encounter and converse with one last time before she went to bed.

Eventually, she came across Proxy, who was looking out of a window when she walked by. "...hi, Jill." he said bluntly, without looking at her.

"Hi Proxy," Jill said, stopping by him.

"...you'll be leaving in the morning, right?" Proxy asked, still without looking at her.

"Yep," Jill replied.

"I see..." Proxy nodded, before he glanced at Jill, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'll be rooting for you, every step of the way. So good luck."

"Thanks," Jill said, smiling. "Good luck to you too. Make sure you take care of my friends for me."

"I will." Proxy said, before he began heading down the hall. "Say, that reminds me... you haven't seen Brick since earlier, right?"

Jill thought back. "...Yeah, not since earlier," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I figured that since you were leaving..." Proxy began, before

he walked off. "...you might not see him for a while. You'd best make with what you got."

She watched Proxy walk away, taking those words into account. Then she grew depressed thinking about it. Brick was probably going to miss her the most, and quite honestly, she was really going to miss him too.

When she tried to look for him, though, he wasn't really anywhere to be seen. Bedtime finally came, and Jill hadn't been able to find Brick. She headed to her room feeling a little upset about that, but the moment she closed her bedroom door behind her, that changed.

"Hi Brownie."

Jill was startled significantly when she saw Brick leaning against the wall. "Brick," she uttered, relaxing.

A moment of silence passed.

Brick approached her slowly. "Brownie," he muttered. He wished he could find the words he wanted to say right now, but he was drawing a blank.

Jill at least had better luck. "Brick…you guys are going to be okay, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," He said. "We'll just miss you a lot." He was growing quieter. " *I'll* miss you a lot…" The bull was stunned when Jill reached forward in a hug, but he held her dearly.

"And I'll miss you too, Brick," she muffled in his shoulder. "More than you know…"

That drove the bull to speak words he thought he'd never have the courage of saying. "I love you Brownie."

"I love you too."

It wasn't long at all before the two of them began kissing, which heated up the longer they kissed. Feelings inside began to bubble up rapidly…

…but they paused. Brick broke away a moment to lock the door, while he looked back at Jill with a small smile. She reflected it back in her own sweet smile.

Then they picked up where they left off, continuing until they fell sound asleep in each other's arms; ending the long, passionate night.

Chapter 35

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

" *Dear Diary,"*

"This morning I set out early, because I don't want to be held back by any more goodbyes. That's why I made the most of last night to spend with everyone, but I couldn't have thought of a better way to end the night than slumbering in Brick's arms. I'll admit that it sounds overly sentimental, but I won't be seeing them for awhile."

"I anticipate a brutal trial…and I hope that I can see my friends again after it's done."

With a satchel at her side full of simple things, like some food, water and her diary, Jill set out into the woods one frosty morning; just minutes before dawn.

"Well, at least I'll have Tails Doll for company."

Jill peered up at the doll that sat on her head. "So, how hard do you think your Big Bro will push me?" she asked.

" *Big Bro isn't going to push you, silly.* " Tails Doll said with a giggle. " *He's going to train you with all he's got! And then some! Big Bro's cool like that.* "

Jill chuckled in amusement. "Right…."

Finally, Jill made it to the spring in the woods, but at the moment, she didn't see Metal. "Hm, he must not be here yet," Jill murmured.

" *Big Bro?* " Tails Doll uttered, as he looked about for a while. " *Why isn't Big Bro here yet?* "

" *Sorry for being late.* " At that point, Metal descended down from the skies, looking at Jill with a serious look. " *You're prepared, I presume?* "

Jill took a deep breath. "As ready as I'll ever be."

" *Good.* " As Metal said that, like last time, a series of metal walls blocked off entry and exit from the spring. " *Time for the training to begin.* " Then, he allowed his arm to turn into a blade, but now, it was glowing red. " *Go on; charge, with all you have.* "

Jill dropped her satchel on the ground, and once she took Tails Doll off her head, she ran at Metal with her own blade in hand shortly after, trying to cut him.

Metal blocked Jill's attack, but when the two swords clashed, sparks flew from the two blades. " *Don't hesitate. Attack!* " Metal said, as he began swinging his arm at Jill.

Jill jumped back from his swing, and lunged again; not hesitating like Metal instructed. "YAAAGH!"

Again, Metal blocked Jill's attack, but now the sparks shooting out actually landed on the grass, which caused a small fire. " *Again!* " Metal called, as he swung his blade at Jill again.

Jill struggled with the next move Metal made; she had a hard time evading it while her attention immediately was drawn to the small fire that began on the grass. However, Jill forced herself to focus and she came at Metal, again. This time, she used more force on it than she had so far.

This time, Metal blocked the incoming strike with a pair of blades, rather than just one, but at that point, Metal's blades immediately caught fire, as the Metallix glared at Jill. " *Come on, put more force into it!* " he said, before slashing his swords out, to knock Jill away.

Jill nearly let out a yelp of terror seeing that; jumping away from him as he knocked her away. She tried to hide the fact she was shaking. With deep breaths and a gulp, she charged after Metal with a vertical slice.

Again, Metal blocked the attack with his blades, but this time, when the three blades collided, the flames on Metal's weapons shot out like sparks, landing in the grass as well. " *Again!* " he yelled, as he

slashed his swords to knock Jill back, now creating a wave of flame as he swung them.

Jill was growing closer and closer to panic. She made a tremendous effort to avoid any fire possible, but the ewe was braking down.

That was when dire survival instincts kicked in.

She gritted her teeth and jabbed her sword at Metal ceaselessly; performing at an alarming rate.

" *Better, better...* " Metal mused, as he parried every blow she made against him with his own swords, which spread even more fire around. " *But still not enough!* " Then, when the opportunity arose, he swung the blunt edge of one of the blades against Jill, intending to knock her down.

Jill was starting to lose control of herself, as images from the past started flashing through her mind.

Fire…she was just so deathly afraid of fire.

She wanted it to leave her alone, to go away. It reminded her of her mistake, of her slip-up, and of the destruction it caused.

Ironically enough flames ignited in her own eyes the moment that Metal knocked her down. In a fiery rage, she jumped back up and charged at Metal dangerously.

As she charged, Metal crossed his blades, taking the blow, but while the ensuing impact didn't result in the blades shattering, Metal could feel his blades being weakened. " *Keep at it!* " Metal yelled, as he rushed at her, swinging his blades wildly at her, but refraining from using the sharp edges.

With Metal coming at her, it only served to feed her dark rage even more.

She blocked all of the attacks with ease, and once Metal paused from his turn, she took hers by jumping forward.

"WRAAAAAUGH!" With an angry roar, she stabbed forward.

This time, Metal got no opportunity to dodge, as Jill's sword shot right through him... or so it seemed. As it turned out, Jill's sword had gone through a hole in Metal's chest; one could assume that he created it, to ensure that he wouldn't be damaged by Jill's attack. *"...I think we can take a break, now."* he muttered, as his blades vanished, before he placed a hand on Jill's wrist, slowly pulling it and the blade away from his body.

Once Metal pulled the blade away, Jill dropped it like a hot potato as it left in a glow of light. She had come back from the enraged trance she had fallen into, and now she was frantically backing away from the fire on the grass, trying not to panic.

"That was fairly intense," Metal mused, as he watched Jill. *"...what's wrong? You don't like fire?"*

Jill shook her head 'no' to answer him, keeping her eyes on the flames. "...p-p-please put it out," she pleaded.

"...alright, I suppose." Metal muttered, as he walked towards where the flames were, before stepping on them, to ensure that they would be properly extinguished. *"How long have you been afraid of fires?"* he asked.

Jill relaxed a bit, but she was still uneasy. "...ever since I was two," she said. "I've had a bad history with it...but the worst of it was when it...when it burned down my village." Why was she sharing this? Right now, Jill was more focused on settling down then questioning why she was telling Metal this.

"Is that so?" Metal mused, as he folded his arms. *"...listen. I should have told you a bit sooner... but we don't have much time to train; only about five days."*

Now Jill was more at ease. "Five days? Why?" she asked curiously.

"...because on the sixth day, Callous intends to fight you," Metal replied. *"And this time, it's for keeps; whoever wins decides the fate of the other."*

"She what?" Jill was shocked to hear this. "You mean...she made a

wager with you?"

"...I suppose you could call it that," Metal muttered, as he turned to face Jill. *"And if both you and I know Callous, she's bound to pull dirty tricks out of her outfit every chance she can get. At least I made it so that you two cannot fight without me as an onlooker..."*

"You made a bet with her?" Jill groaned, massaging her brows in frustration. "Metal, how could you?"

"Look, it's going to be the best opportunity you'll get to finishing her off," Metal said, as he folded his arms. *"And besides, don't you remember that* I'm not one of the good guys *? Instead of quarreling about this, we have to get you ready for the fight."*

Jill sighed in disdain, "way to motivate, Metal..." but after that, she decided to let it go.

"In any case..." Metal muttered, as he cracked his neck. *"...we have to do something about your pyrophobia. There's no doubt that Callous is going to try and take advantage of that during your fight, so we need to eliminate that factor."*

Jill didn't like the sound of that; in fact, her eyes grew small. "...h-how do you intend to do that?" she questioned; then realizing asking that was not a good idea either.

"Well, the best way to tackle one's fear of something..." Metal said, as he opened his hand, just as a ball of flame erupted in his palm. *"...is to confront it head-on."* Then, he slowly walked towards Jill, holding the ball of flame towards her. *"We'll try baby steps, first. Go on; come closer."*

Jill hesitated big time; she recoiled at the sight of it, but after a long time of staring at the fire, she eventually built up the courage to take a step closer.

"Good, good," Metal said, as he stopped moving, still holding the fireball out to her. *"Do come closer, Jill, it's not going to hurt you... well, unless you try touching the actual flames."*

Slowly and surely, she took another step. Then another, and then another. Throughout this, she still kept her eye on the fire cautiously.

Not bad... Metal thought, as he observed Jill's movements. *"Try moving your hand towards it; but don't touch it."*

Jill shot a look at Metal like he was crazy, but afterward, she glanced back at the flame. Finally, she held up her hand to it, feeling the warmth that it radiated. Metal could see her hand was shaking.

We're making progress... Metal thought, as he glanced at Jill's shaking hand. *...but will she endure?*

All it took was one moment for Jill to lose focus with a flinch, and she retreated her hand quicker than the naked eye could catch; turning away from the flame completely.

...that didn't take long at all. Metal thought as he sighed, before he clenched his fist, extinguishing the fireball. *"How was it?"* he asked.

"...it...wasn't bad," she admitted quietly. "But still, I...I can't really handle it..."

"Well, you'll simply have to suck it up, and learn to handle it." Metal said, just as he sat down, looking at Jill. *"Let's try again, but on a smaller scale."* Then, he held up one finger, with a flickering flame suddenly appearing on the end of it. *"Go on."*

Jill sat down with Metal, staring uneasily again at the flame, but this time since it was smaller, she wasn't as terrified. Again, she slowly rose her hand toward it to feel its warmth and again, her hand was shaking, but Jill had a little more confidence this time...

...looks like she's showing some progress . Metal thought, as he waited to see if Jill would either back down, or keep her cool.

This time, Jill actually kept her hand there, but it was still shaking nevertheless. She was a little calmer than before though.

"Good, good, you're showing progress," Metal said, as he looked curiously at Jill. *"...would you like me to take it up a notch?"*

Jill gulped. "...g-go ahead."

"Very well." Hearing this, Metal pulled his hand a bit away from Jill, before he turned his hand around, so that the palm was pointing up. Then, a small ball of fire came into view in his hand; smaller than the previous one, but bigger than the flame he had conjured before. *"Go on."*

Jill glanced away for another moments hesitation, but her eyes eventually returned to the flame as she held her hand to it again. She wasn't as relaxed as before, but she took it steady.

"Just tell me when you're ready for me to go up a notch," Metal said, as he kept his eye at Jill. *I swear, if it takes me five days to rid her of her pyrophobia, we'll have a problem on our hands...* he thought.

Jill didn't want to go farther just yet; right now she just wanted to get used to it.

But eventually her thoughts started to wander and her mind was no longer on the fire. Even when she felt the warmth, she was beginning to forget there was a fire there.

She thought about why Metal was doing this; not the fire, but the fact of training her. It was going to contradict the future a lot, and she wondered if Metal took that into consideration. He likely did, and decided to go through with it anyway because of the circumstances at hand. Then Jill started to think about whether or not to promise her life to the metallix. He sounded desperate...

There has to be a better purpose for you Metal, she thought, closing her eyes.

Maybe during the training, she'd find it; something that Metal can find meaning in. She didn't understand the programming in a machine, but she kept thinking that she could change him, and then-- "ACK!"

It was at that point that Jill's hand accidentally got too close and the fire touched her fingers, burning them. She yanked it back, sticking the fingers in her mouth to soothe the burns. It didn't help the

situation either, since she scooted away from the fire once it happened.

"...that was unexpected," Metal muttered, as he extinguished the fireball again. *"You need to be more careful in the future... Tails Doll, get some water for her."*

"Coming up, Big Bro!" Tails Doll said, as he was suddenly holding a bucket right out of nowhere, before flying towards the pond, filling the bucket, and returning to Jill. *"This should cool you down!"* he said, as he placed the bucket by Jill.

"When you're ready again, just say the word," Metal said, as he closed his eyes.

Jill stuck her fingers in the bucket of water to some relief. Water was always good...

Then pulling out her hand, it began to glow. The burns on her fingers disappeared shortly, healing. That still didn't exactly get rid of the Corruption burns from healing Wiper, but those burns weren't giving her any pain anymore. She wouldn't be surprised if the burns from using Chaos Control with the black emerald were still there.

"Ooh, nifty!" Tails Doll chuckled, as he looked at Jill's hand. *"Can you do that all the time?"*

"Sort of," Jill answered. "There's just some things I can't heal though, so I have to be careful..." Then she smiled at the doll. "Thanks for the water."

"No problem!" Tails Doll laughed, just as he glanced at Metal, whose eyes were still closed. *"...do you wanna try again?"* he asked, as he glanced at Jill.

Jill looked at Metal. "...sure," she uttered.

"Alright, get ready," Metal said, as he opened his hands, as a pair of fireballs appeared, one in each palm. *"I hope you won't mind more than one this time around."*

Jill gazed at them nervously. "Does this mean I have to use both

hands?"

"Well, I would suppose so," Metal nodded, as he looked at Jill. *"But you can handle that, right?"*

Jill looked at Metal, and then at the balls of fire. "...I guess I can try," she said, holding up two shaking hands this time.

She was in his thoughts all morning.

Brick stared out the window of the train as it moved on the bridge over the sea. Soon, they would arrive in Mystic Ruins, and after a little clean up of the Clubhouse, everything will be back to normal.

No, it was never going to be normal; not without Jill.

Then he glanced at the letter he held it his hand. Over and over had he read the words on it.

Hey guys, sorry I left so early.

I want you to know that I'll miss you, and I'll give it all I've got. I hope to see you again sometime soon.

~ Jill

"...miss her already?" he'd hear Natal ask, as she happened to glance at the letter over his shoulder.

Brick looked at her. "Yeah, I miss her," he sighed.

"Yeah, we miss her too Brick," Striker said. "But don't worry about it too much. We'll see her again."

"Yeah, don't worry about it." Jack said in an encouraging tone. "Maybe she'll be back really fast, without us knowing?"

"As long as we know that she's coming back, that's what matters." Proxy said, as he was looking out of the window as well.

"But I wish we didn't have to leave Ani back at the HQ," Striker said.

"Chao," Buddy sadly agreed.

Milo perked up suddenly. "Hey, if Ani's not here, that means we can't really ride the mine cart, can we?"

"I'm sure there's still a way to get there Milo," Brick said.

"Yeah, we can... walk the tracks, or something?" Jack proposed, as he scratched his chin whilst thinking.

"Mine cart?" Whisker asked curiously, as he glanced at Brick. "I dasn't think ye`ve erementioned somethin' like that around me..."

"There's a mine cart we ride that leads us to the deeper parts of the jungle," Brick said. "Ani usually gets it going like a roller coaster with her telekinesis, but now that she's not here..." Brick just remembered that there were some loops in the course that practically ran through the air, so Jack's suggestion wouldn't exactly work. The bull turned to Tails. "Professor, is there another way to get to the Clubhouse other than the mines?"

"Well... you could walk around the mountain, through the jungle." Tails responded after some thinking. "Granted, it would take longer to get to the Clubhouse that way, but it's the safest route."

"You mean that there's another route?" Jack asked.

"...there is a cave, but you'll have to scale a mountain first to get to it." Tails said. "Not to mention, the cave goes through a volcano."

Milo gulped. Suddenly, the roller coaster sounded like the best idea in the world compared to that. He didn't like the idea of going through another volcano.

Striker, however. "Cool! It'll be like another adventure!" he laughed.

Milo shot a shocked look at him. Buddy did too.

But Milo was relieved when Brick disagreed. "I just think we need a more efficient route...I'm thinking that we'll be going back and forth between the Clubhouse and the Professor's shop a lot." Then his eyes were stolen by a cyan colored jewel that Striker held up.

"Could Proxy use Chaos Control to get us there?" Striker asked,

looking at the Chaos Emerald he held.

"...I suppose." Proxy said with a nod, as he looked at the Chaos Emerald. "But it'll be a bit difficult the first time around; I've never been there, right?"

"Still, couldn't hurt to try." Natal shot in, as she glanced at the android.

Just then, the train began to brake to a stop. Once it stopped, a voice over the intercom greeted them. "Now arriving in Mystic Ruins Train Station," the cheery voice spoke, as the doors of the train opened. "Thank you for riding with us."

"Well, this is our stop," Brick said, picking up the sack of Tails' things over his shoulder and walking to the door with the kids following.

"Alright, let`s be seein' what this place looks like..." Whisker said, as he followed the kids out of the train, while Tails, Natal and Proxy followed.

Striker and Rudy darted down the stairs excitedly. "Wait till you see the Clubhouse Rudy!" Striker exclaimed. "It's awesome!"

"Hang on there buck-a-roo," Brick chuckled. "We're going to the Professor's shop first, so don't run too far ahead."

Striker stopped at the foot of the stairs, with his body deflating in disdain. "Awwwww..."

Shortly, the group had crossed the grassy field and made it up another flight of stairs to Tails' workshop. "How does it feel to be back here again, Professor?" Brick asked.

"It feels good..." Tails said with a smile, as he looked at his house. "It feels like I haven't been here for months."

"I suppose it would need a serious round of cleaning, then." Natal said, as she looked up at the house. "Me and Proxy can help out with that, after we've gotten the kids to the Clubhouse."

"Okay," Brick responded. "I'll stay here while you guys do that."

"Woo! *We're going to the Clubhouse! We're going to the Clubhouse* !" Striker sang, doing a little dance. Strangely enough, Buddy decided to join him in his happy dance.

"Then I suppose we ortin' t' get goin', right?" Whisker asked, as he glanced down at the kids.

"Right." Proxy nodded, before he glanced at Striker. "Let's see if I can't get there on the first try." he said with a smile.

Striker halted from his dance and handed Proxy the emerald. "It's a really tall tree!" he said, raising his arms as high as they could go.

"Yeah, and it's in the middle of the jungle," Milo said.

"Alright, let's see what we can do..." Proxy muttered, as he looked at the emerald, before closing his eyes. "...Chaos Control!" Then, he, along with the kids, Whisker, and Natal vanished, leaving Tails and Brick by the house.

"Well, I suppose we should get inside." Tails said, as he moved towards his house. "Wonder how much that needs to be cleaned, here..."

"Probably not much," Brick said.

Charmy was walking around the HQ to check on things. Now Tails had left with his group back to Mystic Ruins, and apparently Jill had left long before anyone was awake. King and his group should be moving in here shortly, and he was walking around to check and see if everything was alright for them.

He came across Boomer, who was trying to walk through the hall. "Boomer, you should be resting!" Charmy said with some surprise.

"I'm okay Captain," Boomer assured. "I'm just going to--" Then she winced, clutching her abdomen.

"Charmy's right; you should try and rest up." they heard Wiper say, as he approached the two of them. "If you need something, I could

get it for you."

"Hey, I can help out, y'know!" Right out of nowhere, Newt ran to the scene, quickly standing close to Boomer, as he placed a hand on her, in case she would fall over. "Don't strain yourself too much, y'hear?"

Boomer let out a deep breath as the pain eased up. "I'll try not to," she said.

"Boomer," Charmy said expectantly, folding his arms.

"No sense in quarreling about it." Wiper began, as he turned away, when he noticed Queen approaching them. "Dusk. What's the matter?"

"I wanted to tell you something, Dawn." Queen replied, as she stopped right in front of the snake. "I heard something approaching the HQ... a chopper."

"Probably GUN..." Wiper muttered. "...how far away?"

"It'll probably be here in five minutes, give or take." Queen said, as she tilted her head. "What will you do?"

"...well, we have to figure out what they want." Wiper shrugged, before glancing at Boomer. "You guys stay in here; I can deal with them on my own."

"A GUN chopper?" Boomer questioned. Wiper still hadn't told them what was up with him and his friends, and why GUN was involved. Part of her had a feeling that it wasn't good.

"I'll explain later. Just don't go outside." Wiper said, as he turned to walk away.

"You'll be alright?" Newt asked, which made the snake glance back at him.

"...yeah. Don't worry." Wiper said with a nod, before walking off.

Boomer watched Wiper walk away with a suspicious eye.

"Just go rest Boomer," Charmy said, as he walked off himself. "I can handle everything by myself as far as prepping up the HQ goes."

"Yeah, you should try and relax a bit y'know..." Newt said, as he smiled a bit. "I can help ya get into bed, if that's alright with you."

Boomer cracked a small smile back at Newt, but it faded as soon as she peered back at where Wiper disappeared. Her intuition was telling her that something was amiss...and she didn't like it. No matter how much she wanted to investigate it, she sadly had to admit she just wasn't in the condition.

"Sure...I guess," she muttered, allowing Newt to help her.

"Alright, just take it easy y'know..." Newt said, as they ventured down towards her room.

"...she is a tough one." Queen noted, once the two were out of earshot. "I've seen her attacked grievously twice, and she still holds on... you must be proud." she said to Charmy.

"Yeah, I'm proud of that," Charmy said, letting out a sigh. "But sometimes she's a little too impulsive as well..."

"Many great warriors often act on impulse." Queen said, as she glanced back at where Boomer and Newt had gone. "I do wonder what lies in her future..."

Soon enough, as Queen had predicted, one could see a helicopter approach the HQ. As it prepared to land, Wiper went outside, approaching it, whilst Queen and Charmy hid by a window, so she could hear whatever would be said outside.

When the helicopter landed, a few troopers stepped out, along with a middle-aged man, who was balding and had a rather rounded physique. "Ah, agent Wiper." he said with a smirk. "Good to see you... you haven't changed."

"...you definitely have, Colonel." Wiper muttered upon seeing this man. "What's your business here? I thought you were retired."

"Who is that man Queen?" Charmy asked.

Meanwhile, from another window, Boomer managed to peek out through it from inside her room to see what was going on.

"...the colonel who was in charge of our units." Queen replied, as she watched the man. "He supposedly retired four years ago, when the current GUN Commander was chosen..."

"Ah, Wiper, that is a good question." the colonel chuckled. "It seems that GUN has chosen me to handle the case regarding the... renegades, if you will."

"You mean the GUN agents who attempted the coup five months ago?" Wiper inquired, as he raised his eyebrow. "Let me guess; they decided to get you when Queen was released."

"Correct. You're as straight to the point as I remember you." the colonel chuckled. "We're currently investigating their whereabouts, and... well, some have suspected that they could be hiding out there." he said, pointing towards the HQ.

"What a nerve he has," Charmy grumbled.

"Colonel, there's no need to check." Wiper said, as he looked the colonel straight in the eye.

"Oh? Is there something you're hiding?" the colonel said, as he looked down at Wiper.

"No... but I can assure you, as an agent of GUN, that there isn't one person in there who doesn't belong there." Wiper responded, as he folded his arms.

"...hmph. Guess I'll take your word for it, then." the colonel scoffed, as he motioned for the soldiers to enter the chopper. "We'll be on our way, then."

Charmy still watched the Colonel suspiciously. So did Boomer from her own window, who instantly didn't like the sight of that man.

As the soldiers entered the chopper, the colonel suddenly snapped his fingers, as if he realized something. "Ah, yes, there is one more thing..." he said, as he looked down at Wiper. "We've sent out a

special agent to locate the renegades."

This made Wiper a bit curious. "...special agent?" he inquired.

"Let's just say that it's an old friend... one who is dying to meet the missing agents again." Then, the colonel chuckled. "And believe me, they'll be dying to see him, too."

"What are you getting at?" Wiper said, as he glared at the colonel.

"Oh, Dawn, you haven't figured it out yet?" the colonel said, as he grinned. "Did you think that the seven of you were the only survivors of that gauntlet?"

"Hm? Queen, what's he talking about?" Charmy asked.

Queen's eyes were widened, as she glared at the colonel. "...a survivor?" she uttered.

"...are you serious?" Wiper uttered, as he looked at the colonel in complete shock. "No... no, there were only seven survivors! Me, King, Queen, Sage, Hunter, Ripper and Miser! There were no others!"

"Not technically, so to speak." the colonel said, as he looked down at Wiper. "But GUN decided to take one body you left in your wake... and revive him."

"...no..." Wiper uttered, as he backed away from the colonel. "You don't mean... no, that's impossible! He's dead! I saw him die! I KILLED HIM!"

"That may be so." the colonel said, as he turned to walk into the chopper. "...in any case, let's just hope that you're telling me the truth; otherwise, Johnny might come visit." Then, he began laughing, as he entered the chopper, which took off almost immediately after.

"Johnny?" Charmy murmured to himself, and after studying not only Wiper's reaction, but Queen's as well, it made it seem even more like it was truly a bad omen.

As the chopper left, Wiper could only watch it leave with a helpless

look, as he sank to his knees. "...it can't be true..." he uttered.

"...I didn't think they would sink so low." Queen uttered, as she closed her eyes. "There's a lot you people do not know about us agents and our past... and Johnny just so happens to be part of that past."

"I'm guessing he was a pretty bad part of your past then," Charmy supposed; as his detective skills kicked in. "What exactly does this mean for you and your friends, Queen?"

"It means..." Queen muttered, as she closed her eyes. "...that things are really going to take a turn for the worse." Then, she looked out at Wiper, who was still on his knees. "...I should go out to him." Then, she stood up and left.

Charmy rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It was a good thing that Tails took the kids back when he did, because by the sound of things, practically a war might erupt. He chuckled, closing his eyes. "Vector, Espio, Mighty; I sure hope what you taught me hasn't failed me yet!"

Chapter 36

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Far away, in a forest somewhere, someone was furiously cutting through the woodwork, searching for someone. "They're bound to be hiding somewhere..." this person muttered, as he pushed aside a tree; it was a lion, and right between his eyes, a scar ran straight down. Also, on his chest, a steel compartment was located, and judging from the pulsing light on it, one could guess that it was linked to his heart. "...and when I find them, it's gonna be gruesome."

"Well, what do we have here?"

Soon the lion encountered a dark figure leaning against a tree. This figure turned out to be a certain scandalous ewe.

"...it depends," the lion uttered, as he looked at the ewe. "Who are you?"

The ewe eyed him with interest. "Just someone who shares the same interest. You know, hunting down someone you despise..." she teased.

"...really?" the lion questioned, as he raised his eyebrow. "What's your name, then?"

"My name's Callous, handsome," she introduced, chuckling. "How about you?"

"Call me Johnny." the lion introduced, as he leaned against a tree. "So, who're you looking after, babe? Someone who got away from a fight, or something?"

"Let's say, she's like a twin sister of mine," Callous said, "We've been fighting for as long as we can remember. I'm just leisurely taking my time while she wastes her energy training for a fight we'll have in a week." Then she smirked at Johnny. "What's your story?"

"Eh, it's nothing special." Johnny said, as he knocked at the compartment on his chest. "Fifteen years ago, or something, some people I was ordered to kill ended up doing me in first. One got me through the heart, and the other got me right between the eyes." Then he pointed at his scar. "Apparently, GUN's kept my body in prime condition since then... and just recently, they got me back in action. I think they did it with a Chaos Emerald, or something..."

"A Chaos Emerald huh?" Callous said. "Interesting. So you're hunting down the very people that killed you long ago?"

"Well, they just so happened to bust out of GUN around five months ago." Johnny replied, as he shrugged. "Seven of them. Five of them flew the coop, one was captured and recently busted out, and the last one... he's the bastard who gave me this scar."

"Hmm," Callous certainly recognized the story. In fact, she was beginning to believe that she knew what he was talking about. "Gee, I'm not sure if its just coincidence, but I remember someone with that story," she said in a teasing tone. "What was her name?" A moment she tapped her lip, before she smirked at Johnny. "Does the name Queen sound familiar to you?"

"...yeah, it does." Johnny nodded, as he looked up at Callous. "How do you know her?" he asked, as he began approaching the ewe.

"Would you believe me if I said that my twin sister is friends with them?" Callous chuckled. "Actually, I must say that I was the one who broke Queen out of that cryolab, but that wasn't my main intention. It's a long story."

"Really?" Johnny uttered, as he looked at Callous with interest, before he stopped in front of her. "And would you happen to know where they're hiding out?"

"Unfortunately not," Callous said, "but I can say that one of them is with me." Then Callous glanced behind the tree she was leaning on. "Isn't that right, Ripper?"

"...kekekekekekeke... we're afraid that Ripper isn't available." At that point, the mantis appeared from behind Callous, looking down at

Johnny. "Kekekekeke... he seems to be afraid of you... but we are not."

"...so, I see that the little pipsqueaks are all grown up, now." Johnny muttered, as he smirked. "So, what? He's gone off the deep end when it comes to sanity?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Callous replied. "But you should stay Johnny. We're waiting for a couple of friends, and if you know Ripper, you might know them too. Besides," she gave the lion a wink. "I kinda like you."

"Is that so?" Johnny said, as he glanced at Callous. "Well, you're certainly a piece of eye-candy, too. I think I might stay for a while." he added.

She chuckled at that.

"Callousssssssss...." hissed two demented, childish voices.

"That didn't take very long," Callous muttered. Turning to where the voice came from, she, Johnny and Ripper saw two small figures come out of the darkness in the ground. At first, they couldn't make them out as they looked like globs of black.

Then they started to adjust and appear as a couple of little girls.

Twin butterflies.

"It's nice to see you again Callous!" the pink one giggled.

"Y-yeah...we were wondering wh-what happened to you," the blue one stuttered.

"Bloom, Gloom," Callous said with outstretched, welcome arms, "it's good to see you two as well, and guess who else is here with me."

Bloom's and Gloom's eyes widened when they alternated glances between Ripper and Johnny.

"Is...is it r-really you Ripper?" Gloom questioned.

"And Johnny too!" exclaimed Bloom, jumping excitedly.

"Bloom and Gloom?" Johnny uttered, as he smirked a bit. "Heh. Last I heard, you two were blown up by Sage. Guess GUN's not as good when it comes to writing autopsies as I thought."

"...we sense something off about you two..." Ripper uttered, as he tilted his head. "...how did they come in contact with you, Callous?"

"They were revived," Callous said. "By my Daddy."

"Don't forget Callous, he's our Daddy too!" Bloom said. "And we're going to make Jill suffer for what she did to him!"

"Ah, so you two are princesses as well." Ripper noted, as he cackled, his blades moving erratically. "We are honored to meet you."

"Personally, I'd want to get revenge on the guys who offed me, first." Johnny said, as he chuckled. "But this Jill chick... what makes her so important that you'd wanna off her?"

"Well, for one thing, she is a very powerful warrior," Callous said, turning to Johnny. "In fact, she seems to be the next upcoming Sonic the Hedgehog, so to speak."

"Is that so?" Johnny mused, before he chuckled. "She doesn't sound that tough. I bet I could take her on, if I hadn't been busy. You know, with those escapees, and all."

"Kekekekeke... he knows where they're hiding." Ripper chuckled, as he looked down at Johnny.

"...really." Johnny said, as he looked up at Ripper. "Would 'he' be so kind as to point me in the right direction?"

"Yes, I'm curious to know where they are as well," Callous said, looking at Ripper.

"Tell us! Tell us!" cheered Bloom.

"Kekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as the blades suddenly stopped

moving about. "...last he saw them, they were outside of... the Chaotix HQ. We suspect that they're still there."

"Well, ain't that convenient." Johnny chuckled, as he cracked his neck. "Alright, let's get going. The sooner I take care of those renegades..." Then, he turned to glance at Callous. "...the quicker I can get to know you a bit more, baby doll."

"Right back at ya, dark, tall, and handsome," Callous chuckled, giving him another wink.

"Hey, Johnny, can we come with ya?" Bloom pestered. "Pleeeeeease?"

"Actually Bloom, I've got something else I want you and your sister to do for me," Callous said.

"Aw…" moaned Bloom in disdain.

"And what exactly did you have in mind for them, princess?" Ripper questioned, as he glanced down at Callous.

"Sheesh, again with the princess-stuff... is your dad royalty, or something, Callous?" Johnny quipped.

"Nah, he's just really prim and proper when he—er, *they* refer to me," Callous said. "Speaking of which…" she looked over at Ripper with a raised eye brow. "If you aren't Ripper, then what should we refer to you as?"

"...you may refer to us as... Slashers, our dear princess." Ripper said with a grin, as his blades began moving about erratically.

"...hmph. Weirdo." Johnny muttered, before he glanced at Callous. "So, what did you have in mind for the little kiddies?" he said, motioning towards Bloom and Gloom.

"I'd like them to find other little kiddies… *certain* other little kiddies," Callous said. She knelt down to the twins. "I want you to find out where Jill's little friends are."

"Oooooh," Bloom said; just as a disturbing giggle escaped her. "That

sounds like fun!"

"Yeah," Callous said, smirking.

"Ah, she has friends of her own." Johnny remarked. "Let me guess; she's not with her friends because of her training, right?"

"That's right," Callous said, with her smirk going wide. "So while she's training, I can round up her little friends. Then our fight comes, and I can use her friends to my advantage; if you know what I mean."

Johnny smirked at that. "Heh... I like your style, already." he said, as he cracked his neck. "So... where *is* that Chaotix HQ, anyway?" he asked, as he glanced at Ripper, or 'Slashers', as he now referred to himself as.

"Kekekekeke... you could travel with the princess in her darkness to get there... it's quite the convenient way of transportation..." Slashers said, as his blades moved about even more.

"Ah yes, a place dubbed 'the dark,' which is an area that so very few can access," Callous briefly explained. "But it's how I get around, and I know where the Chaotix HQ is so if you'd like I could take you there."

"...you know what?" Johnny said, as he gave Callous a nod. "I'm game. Let's go into this... 'darkness', then."

Callous smirked like an evil toad. Darkness began to collect around her feet, as she held her hand to Johnny. "Keep in mind; the first time into the darkness can be a bit rough."

"Eh, it can't be worse than dying." Johnny said with a shrug, as he took hold of Callous' hand. "And even that wasn't as bad as I'd have imagined."

Oh, if only you knew Johnny, Callous thought with amusement. Once she had Johnny's hand, the two started to sink in the ground. "Remember you two," she said, looking at the twins. "Pretend to be their friends. Don't blow your cover until I give you the signal to take them. Got it?"

"Got it," They both answered with salutes.

By then, Johnny and Callous were gone from sight, and the darkness shortly vanished afterward.

"...kekekekekeke..." Slashers chuckled, as he glanced at the two butterflies. "So, the Master brought you back from the other side..." he uttered, as he tilted his head. "Do you intend to free the Master?"

"Of c-course," Gloom answered hesitantly.

"Yeah, because he lets us do whatever we want!" Bloom laughed deviously. "Unlike that dummy-head Jill, who's going to die because she didn't let us do what we want!"

"I w-wonder what her f-friends are like?" Gloom asked, looking up thoughtfully.

"Have you met them Slashers?" Bloom asked curiously, rocking on her toes back and forth.

"...we have not met them, per se." Slashers said, as he closed his eyes. "But he has... he wanted to kill them, as with everyone who he didn't grow up with. And when they weren't available... he could only depend on us." Then, he broke out into another laughing fit, as his blades moved in sync with the laughter.

"They sound nice!" Bloom laughed with Slashers, like nothing was wrong.

"L-lets go then," Gloom said, tugging on her sister's arm.

"Hey Slashers, maybe you should check on Jill and make sure she won't stop Callous in case she gets the feeling of what she's doing," Bloom suggested. "Jill and Callous are connected after all, and it happened before."

"We would..." Slashers said with a nod, after breaking out of his hysteric laughing fit. "...but we don't know where she is hiding right now. In hindsight, maybe we should have accompanied Callous into the dark... kekekekekeke..."

"Hey, maybe you can go into the dark by yourself!" Bloom said. "After all, Callous is nice enough to let her friends do that by themselves!"

"...we've never tried that before..." Slashers noted, as he looked down at the ground. "...but we can try... kekekekekeke..." Then, he suddenly stabbed all four of his blades into the ground, with an insane look in his eyes. "...kekekekekekeke..."

"Go Slashers! You can do it!" Bloom cheered optimistically.

"Y-yeah…k-keep trying!" Gloom added.

Sure enough, darkness crawled around the four blades.

"...kekekekekeke..." Slashers chuckled, as he grinned. "Yes... we feel it working... it-" At that point, he suddenly groaned in pain, and for a brief moment, the darkness around the blades seemed to go in flux.

Kekekekeke... you're not welcome in my head!

"...kekekekeke... he tries resisting... but it's futile; we are in control." Then, as more darkness gathered around the blades, Slashers sunk down into it, as he gave the butterflies a look. "For the Master!" he said, before vanishing.

"Goodie!" Bloom said. "Now let's go find Jill's friends!"

" *Alright... you're getting the hang of it.* " At this point, Metal and Jill had moved on to a larger area of practice; namely, a bonfire. " *Just tell me when you want to go higher.* "

Jill was surprised she was as calm as she was right now; usually she would be on the brink of panic. Sure, she was still shaking severely and there was still some restraint on her fear, but she was getting used to the idea of it.

"I might try something bold…" she uttered. "…make a circle of fire around me this time."

Wait a minute, that's the CRAZIEST thing I've ever suggested! She

screamed in her head.

"Consider it done." Metal said, as he glanced at Tails Doll. *"Make a circle, Tails Doll."*

"Alright, Big Bro!" Tails doll said in an enthusiastic tone, as he began flying around Jill in a circle. Then, the gem over him lit up, before opening, letting a trail of oil pour out from it, surrounding Jill.

"Just tell me if you want out." Metal said, as he grabbed hold of the bonfire, taking out a burning branch, just as he placed it against the oil, igniting it, and surrounding Jill in a circle of flames.

Now would usually be the time for Jill to finally panic.

To be honest, she was just about close to it too, but then she remembered the insight she gained about it. *It's under control,* she thought. *I'm okay...it's not going to hurt me.* After all, she hasn't been hurt so far; except that one time when she wasn't paying attention.

The idea was to respect fire and don't ignore it.

So far, Jill managed to simply look around at the flames surrounding her. The heat was overwhelming, but other then that, Jill trained her fear; her mind. She just kept telling herself in her mind that she was alright. It required her to take deep breaths though.

I'll be damned; she's showing some actual progress. Metal thought, as he watched Jill closely. *She might be able to get over it... that's a good girl.*

Jill was even beginning to relax now. *I'm actually doing it,* she thought, with a small smile creeping up.

But the smile fell immediately, once she felt a disturbing tingle inside her.

" *Hm? Something wrong?* " Metal asked, as he looked curiously at Jill. " *Do you want me to extinguish the flames?* "

As he was busy being occupied with Jill, Tails Doll glanced at the

water, as if there was something there he noticed. *...is that...* he thought.

"…something's wrong," Jill said, still trying to decipher the bad feeling she was getting. "I keep getting the feeling like there's something going on…something bad."

" *Hmm... you know, I could send out a scout of some sort, if that would make you feel safer.* " Metal suggested, just as he noticed Tails Doll staring at the water. " *...Tails Doll, what's wrong?* "

" *...there's someone in the water, Big Bro...* " Tails Doll said in an eerie tone.

"In the water?" Jill wondered. Then she remembered that she was surrounded by fire and she couldn't go anywhere. "Metal, could you put out the fire?" she asked.

Without a word, and without looking at Jill, Metal simply raised his arm, as liquid metal shot out from his hand, quickly covering up the flames. " *Let's see who our visitor is...* " Metal muttered, as his eyes began glowing. *Initiating scan...*

Jill walked over to the spring to inspect it herself, but Metal would be more likely to find something than she would.

Then again, Jill also saw that something in the water. *What is that?* She thought.

" *Get back!* " Quickly, Metal grabbed Jill's shoulder, pulling her away from the water. " *He's coming at us!* "

Just as he said that, someone shot right out of the water; namely, a large mantis, brandishing four scythe-like blades for hands. "Kekekekekekeke... found you!"

" *Ripper!* " Tails Doll exclaimed, just as the mantis landed right in front of Jill and Metal, the Metallix standing in front of Jill, covering her.

"…no, it's not Ripper anymore," Jill uttered. She sensed Corruption taking its toll on the mantis, and while it wasn't acting on Ripper

himself, she knew that it wasn't him. Besides, she knew beforehand that Ripper was under Callous' control.

"Who are you?" she demanded the mantis.

"...we are Slashers," Slashers chuckled with that demented voice, as he looked at Jill with an absolutely insane look, his head jittering neurotically, and his blades moving about erratically. "We are in control of him now... as we should have been, ever since we let him first taste blood."

" *I don't know what you're talking about,* " Metal began, as his right arm turned into a blade, " *but you're disrupting our training session. So I suggest you scram, before someone gets hurt.* "

"Oh, look at the all-powerful dictator, protecting the helpless damsel in distress." Slashers cackled, as he moved his glance at Metal. "So this is what you're lowering yourself to? A goodie-goodie's fencing coach? The Master wouldn't even consider using your lifeless husk as a door-stopper, you waste of mechanics."

"Master?" Was he talking about Callous?

No, Jill had more things to worry about then who was the Master. Again, she remembered the memory that Sage showed her, and she knew that it could be dangerous.

But it gave her something to work with.

"Ripper!" she called. "I don't want to hurt you!"

"Ripper cannot hear you!" Slashers cackled, as he began moving closer to Metal and Jill. "We are in control! We are the only ones he needs! We maim! We kill! We slaughter! We are the very reason for his existence!"

" *He's mentally insane.* " Metal muttered, as he turned his other arm into a blade, before crossing them. " *Leave him to me, Jill.* "

"That's not true Slashers," Jill said sternly. "I know Ripper can hear me. You aren't the bosses of him!"

"Of course not! We are his friends! He is just very submissive!" Slashers laughed, as he raised all of his blades, preparing to send them slashing down at Metal. "Now, let us show him what we do to those who defy the Master!"

" *I don't think so!* " Metal responded, as he prepared to block the incoming attack... but it never came. " *...what?* "

"...kekekekeke..." As it turned out, Slashers couldn't even move his blades from where he held them, though from the looks of it, he was struggling. "...what? He can't still be resisting?"

"Ripper! You're strong enough to fight them!" Jill continued. "Don't believe ANY of the lies they say!"

Well, Ripper can't exactly fight Corruption, and Jill knew she'd have to help him, so she ran around Metal after the mantis.

"Ungh... don't listen to her! She won't let you kill and slaughter!" Slashers yelled, as he strived to be able to move the blades, but they just wouldn't budge.

Then... "...kekekekekekeke..." he began laughing, with his voice sounding normal. "...kekekekekeke... KEKEKEKEKEKEKE! I don't need you to let me kill! I'll kill who I want to! Starting with... YOU!" Just as he said that, one of his blades suddenly made a swift swipe... aimed at one of his own hands, letting it fall to the ground.

"AAAAAAARGH!" Slashers yelled in pain, as he looked at the cut-off hand with a look of sheer horror. "You're... you're killing us! Are you insane?"

"Kekekekekekeke!" he suddenly lapsed, as he grinned. "What kind of question is that? Jill! I can't hold them still for much longer! Kekekekekekeke!"

Jill made it to him, grabbing the blades. "Hang on Ripper!" she called, as her hands started to glow.

In the twist of events that Metal and Tails Doll wouldn't see, it went into a void of darkness; a place where Ripper was held in his mind.

But it wouldn't be so dark anymore.

" *Ripper, I wish I could've saved you from that dark past…"*

As her voice echoed in the darkness of his mind, Ripper could see a ball of light that appeared.

" *I want you to know that your life isn't meaningless, like they made you believe…"*

"...kekekekeke..." Ripper uttered, as he slowly reached out to that ball of light, though one could see him trembling weakly. "...my life... always focused on killing... kekekeke..." he uttered, as he got on his feet. "...I guess... kekekekeke... I've always been... afraid... kekekekeke..."

" *You don't have to be afraid anymore Ripper. I'm not going to hurt you."*

The ball of light started to grow brighter, and even morph into a white figure. It turned out to be Jill in her Holy Form, with her wings stretched magnificently; and not green wings of energy, but actual feathered wings.

She was holding out her hand to him, as she continued to radiate with pure light.

" *I want to help you."*

"...kekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled with a weak smile, as he stretched his arm out to grab Jill's as much as he could...

" ***He stays with us!*** " All of a sudden, globs of darkness, shaped to resemble Ripper, grabbed the mantis from behind, as they tried pulling him away from Jill. " ***We are his reason for existing! Without us, he would be nothing more than a spastic loon who would fit better in at a mental institution! He cannot survive on his own!*** "

"...kekekekekeke..." Even though it seemed like Ripper didn't put up much of a fight, he still kept stretching his arm out to Jill, as he was on the verge of tears. "...help... me..."

Jill only glared at the darkness sternly. *"You are NOT his reason for his existence!"*

She crossed her arms just as she became blindingly bright *. "And he's more than you will ever be, Slashers!"* The moment her arms uncrossed, light shot out in a devastating force that would knock the darkness back ten-fold.

" ***GUAAAAH!*** " As the dark was knocked away from Ripper, however, even more of it seemed to gather behind Ripper. " ***What would you know of that? You cannot tell us with a straight face that you know what his feeble mind has endured! Without us, he would be as good as dead!*** "

" *Watch me say it!"* Jill said. *"YES, I do know what he endured! I felt his pain too, thanks to your pitiful Master!"*

This time, Jill reached forward and grabbed Ripper in a hug, keeping the darkness from swallowing him whole. *"He doesn't need you! He's got his friends! He's not alone!"*

"...friends..." Ripper uttered, as he finally began crying.

" ***Do not think you can defy the will of the Master!*** " At that point, the gathered darkness suddenly formed into a massive wave, which threatened to swallow both of them. " ***He is ours!*** "

"...no..." Ripper uttered, as he clenched his teeth, closing his eyes. "...I don't belong to anyone... I don't need you..."

" ***WHAT?*** "

"I said..." Ripper growled, as his eyes shot open. "I DON'T NEED YOU!"

" *THAT'S IT!"* Jill exclaimed, just in time for the two of them to be encased in light, preventing the wave of darkness from ever reaching them. In an instant, all the darkness was obliterated, thanks to Ripper's help.

Then finally, Metal and Tails Doll saw Jill stir as she stumbled away from Ripper in exhaustion.

" *Jill!* " With a bolt, Tails Doll flew right towards Jill, placing his hand on her forehead. " *Are you okay?* "

"...kekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he looked down at Jill. "...thank... you..." At that point, he suddenly collapsed, falling to the ground.

"Ripper!" Jill snapped back to her senses and knelt by Ripper's side, setting a hand on him. She looked him over to sense if anything was left over, and thankfully, she didn't detect any more Corruption.

"...thank you..." Ripper repeated, as he began closing his eyes. "I... I couldn't help but let them control me... but you drove them away..." As he spoke, his voice began sounding weaker, as his eyes closed more and more. "...see you around..." Then, his eyes fully closed...

...only to suddenly jolt open again, as a painful sensation went through his body. "Ow. Ow, ow, ow, ow, owowowowowowowowowowow-"

" *That is for disrupting our training session.* " As it turned out, Metal had stabbed Ripper's hand with one of his own blade-arms, as he looked down at the mantis, who was wriggling about on the ground, trying to get out of Metal's grip. " *Now don't you even think about dying on us or something of the sort. Tails Doll, get his hand over here.* "

" *Alright, Big Bro!* " Tails Doll called, as he fluttered towards the hand Ripper had cut off, before slowly dragging it towards Metal, who finally retracted the blade from the mantis.

" *Jill, I trust that you can heal up that little stab-wound?* " Metal said, as he turned to Tails Doll.

"Uh," Jill certainly didn't expect that to happen, but she slowly nodded, applying glowing hands to the area to heal.

"Ungh..." Ripper groaned, as he looked up at Metal, who had taken the hand from Tails Doll. "...why did you do that?" he inquired.

" *You have answers.* " Metal replied in a simple tone, as he took hold of the arm Ripper had cut off the bladed hand from, before

connecting the hand with the bloody arm stump. " *Answers that can benefit us.* " Then, lifting up one finger, a stream of fire blew out from it. " *Don't waste your energy with this injury, Jill; I can handle it.* "

Just as he said that, he pointed the stream of flame at where the hand had been severed, making sure to weld it back into place, as Ripper groaned in pain. Seeing him do that, Tails Doll gasped. " *Woah, Big Bro's really helping him out!* " he said in a happy tone.

Jill blinked as she watched in amazement.

" *And...* " Metal began, as he eventually moved away from Ripper, looking down at the mantis. " *...there. Good as new.* "

Blinking, Ripper glanced at that arm, seeing that his hand was back in place. "...why did you do-"

" *Consider it an act of... hospitality, you could say.* " Metal shrugged, as he folded his arms. " *Now, if you wouldn't mind... we need to ask you a few questions.* "

"First of all, do you have any idea what Callous is up to?" Jill asked; finally realizing that the bad feeling she had gotten earlier had to do with Callous.

"...Callous..." Ripper muttered, as he blinked, before his eyes widened. "Aah! She's planning on taking advantage of your friends during a fight!"

" *Take advantage of...* " Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. " *...I should have known. How does she intend to do that?* "

"Um... there were these two..." Ripper began, as he held his head in thought. "Kekekekeke... it was... two butterflies! They were gonna find your friends, and...pretend to be friendly!"

"Two butterflies?" Jill blurted uneasily. "You mean, Bloom and Gloom?"

"...yeah, that's right." Ripper nodded. "But I thought Sage killed them... kekekekeke... just how did they come back alive?"

" *I don't think that's the biggest issue at hand, here.* " Metal said, as he folded his arms. " *What else is Callous doing?* "

"Um... she found this one guy... and he was going after King's group..." Ripper muttered, just as he held his head in pain. "Ow... sorry, I got a headache... kekekekeke..."

" *...one guy...* " Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. " *Somehow, I doubt that it's Calculate; he doesn't exactly have a vendetta against any of those GUN agents.* "

"Ripper, do you remember what this guy looked like?" Jill asked; but somehow, she had a feeling. If Bloom and Gloom had come back, not just from that dark time but from Jill's own encounters with them, then there might be other possibilities…

And these possibilities put Jill even more at unease.

"Um... he had..." Ripper began, as he groaned. "Kekekeke... he had red hair... almost like a mane... and he had this... scar, running between his eyes. And there was a... steel box, on his chest." Then, he yelped. "That's... all I can remember..."

Jill was now worried. "You're…not talking about Johnny, are you?"

"Um..." Ripper grunted, as he held his head. "...yeah, that's him!" he said, as he quickly got to his feet. "Kekekekeke! I can't stay here! I've got to-" However, Metal was quick to pull Ripper down.

" *You can't even think straight without risking brain trauma.* " Metal said, as he folded his arms. " *You're going to have to stay here for a short while.* " Then, he turned to face Jill. " *And that goes for you, too. We can't take any sort of break from your training.* "

"Shoot," Jill uttered in dismay. How in the world was Johnny alive? Didn't Desperado and Wiper kill him?

Only GUN could do something like that.

Jill finally realized right then the reason why King was going to leave. GUN had figured out their whereabouts and decided to hunt them down, and they didn't want everyone else involved.

"…but that doesn't mean we can't warn them," Jill said, thinking of something else. She picked up her satchel that was on the ground and dug through it. There was the communicator that Wiper gave her, which was underneath the Chaos Emerald. "I can contact both groups and warn them to be on the lookout," she said, looking at the communicator in her hand.

However, Metal simply grabbed Jill's arm, looking sternly at her. " *If I may, Jill...* " he said, as he began lowering her arm. " *...but I think it's about high time that Callous learns... that she is not the superior villain.* " Then, he turned to face Tails Doll. " *Tell me, Jill... where is the Clubhouse you talked about? I know that it's in the Mystic Ruins, but just where in the ruins is it hidden?* "

Jill was silent. Could she really tell Metal where the Clubhouse was at? Right now, maybe the circumstances called for it, but for the future, she couldn't do that.

But Jill put the urgency at top priority. There's no telling what Bloom and Gloom could do to her friends.

"…it's near the temple," she admitted with her head sinking. "The temple we first encountered."

" *I see...* " he nodded, before he looked at Tails Doll. "Y *ou heard her, Tails Doll. Go clean up.* "

" *Alright, Big Bro!* " Tails Doll said in a cheery tone, before he sped off at a blinding speed, leaving the three on their own.

" *As for this Johnny character...* " Metal said, as he began chuckling. " *...I have a certain someone who will be of great aid there.* " Then, his eyes suddenly began glowing intensely, as he transmitted a signal to a certain simian.

Overriding Unit SNITCH's neural control... mission objective clear: Approach Chaotix HQ, neutralize target: "Johnny". Avoid any other confrontation, especially regarding subject: "Callous". Engage operation: "Metal Sonic is Superior".

Meanwhile, somewhere far away in the outskirts of the now

mechanical Green Hill Zone, Cal received the signal. *Oh great,* he thought in disdain, as his rocket boosters kicked up and he made his way to his mission.

Back in the forest, Jill still was worried. *I hope they'll be alright,* she thought.

" *If you're worrying about them, don't.* " Metal said, as he closed his eyes. " *With the unit I sent out, Johnny should be occupied. And as for the butterflies... well, alive or undead, Tails Doll is one foe they'll wish they'd never have made.* "

"…if you say so," Jill said.

" *What, you don't trust me?* " Metal said, before he chuckled. " *Well, that's to be expected. So, shall we resume training?* "

"Alright," Jill said.

Chapter 37

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"WOOHOO! WE'RE HOME!" roared Striker excitedly as he tore through the halls toward his own room.

"WOO! It's been forever!" Jack laughed, as he ran after Striker, laughing like a kid.

"Aar, wait up!" Whisker called, as he also ran after Jack and Striker.

"...heh. Like kids, aren't they?" Natal muttered, as she smirked.

"Well, some of them are kids." Proxy noted. "The others are just very excitable."

Out of all the kids, Milo was the only one who lagged behind, walking with Natal and Proxy. "I hope Brick can finish helping the Professor so they can come over too," he said.

Meanwhile, Striker plowed through the door into his room. "It's all still here!" he said, beginning to jump on the bed.

"Wow! Cool room Striker!" Rudy said looking around in awe.

"Chao!" Buddy was also very happy to be back, hopping on the bed with Striker.

"Waah, it's still here!" Jack said in a happy tone, as he looked inside Striker's room. "Just like when we left the Clubhouse!"

"Well, this seems like a cozy place t' stay!" Whisker said, "Much more cozy than any brig on me old ship, that`s fer sure!"

"You guys'll like this place!" Striker said, jumping right off the bed onto his feet. "It's got all the cool stuff a tree house has, and more! C'mon! I'll show you around the other places!" Then he darted out the room. "We've got a kitchen, and a room with lots of computers, and even a room with a giant TV where we can watch scary

movies!"

"Seriously?" Rudy laughed. "SWEET!" And the kangaroo eagerly followed Striker.

"Scary movies? Ain`t ye kids a bit too young fer that sorta thin'?" Whisker inquired, as he and Jack quickly followed Striker and Rudy.

"Jill and Brick says that if I watch with them, it'll be alright!" Jack said with a smile.

"...an' how old be ye again?" Whisker asked.

"17! Why do you ask?" Jack replied, which left Whisker with a dumbfounded look, as the two ran after Striker and Rudy.

As Proxy, Natal and Milo walked after the kids and Whisker on their own pace, after a short while, Proxy glanced towards a window. "...strange..."

"Hm? Something wrong?" Natal asked, as she glanced at Proxy.

"...I just felt something weird, is all..." Proxy shrugged.

"...no, I feel it too," Milo said, suddenly clutching to Proxy insecurely.

"Hrm..." Natal hummed, as she glanced outside as well. "...want me to check it out?" she asked, as she looked down at Milo.

"...Can you?" Milo asked in unsureness.

"Sure thing." Natal said with a smile, as she rubbed Milo's head. "Wait here." Then, she turned around, and made her way down the way they had come from.

"...whatever I felt was sort of vague..." Proxy muttered, as he glanced at Milo. "What about you? How did it feel for you?"

"It's vague for me too," Milo said. "...but it didn't feel good. It felt scary...like something bad's coming."

"...I see." Proxy nodded, as he folded his arms. "We'll just have to be

cautious, then..."

Outside of the clubhouse, Natal walked out in the field, her tongue gripping the hilt of her nodachi, as she glanced cautiously from side to side. *Alright...* she thought. *...who's there?*

"Um...e-excuse us?" Soon, Natal saw a certain blue butterfly coming out of the bushes nervously; it was Gloom. "W-we're lost..."

"Yeah, could you tell us where we are?" Now the pink one came out with her sister; Bloom.

"...you're lost, huh?" Natal questioned, as she looked down at the two butterflies. "Well, you're in the Mystic Ruins... just where do you two live?"

"Mystic Ruins? That's far!" Bloom said in amazement.

"W-we don't really know where we l-live..." Gloom said. "All w-we know it's...well, hidden somewhere."

"...hm, that is a bummer..." Natal muttered, as she folded her arms. "So, what are your names?"

"My name's Bloom!" the pink one said enthusiastically. "This is Gloom, my sister!"

"H-hi," Gloom said shyly with a small wave.

"Bloom and Gloom..." Natal noted, as she nodded. "Fits, I guess." Then, she glanced back at the clubhouse. "Well, until we find out just where you live, you could-" At that point, Natal stopped. "...hey, did you two hear that?"

"H-h-h-h-h-hear wh-wh-what?" Gloom nearly panicked, clutching to her sister in fear.

"...I dunno." Natal muttered, as she scratched her head. "It kind of sounded like someone was yelling "no" very loudly..." Then, her eyes widened, as she took out her nodachi, looking up in the air. "Something's coming!"

And if the two butterflies would look above them, they'd see what looked like an orange bolts in the sky, headed right towards them.

"EEEEEEP!" Gloom shrieked, just as Bloom grabbed her and yanked her out of harm's way.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" the bolt suddenly yelled, as it brutally slammed right into the ground, which startled Natal beyond belief.

"What the hell is that?" she yelped, as she quickly took out her two remaining swords, watching the dust bank that was created from this collision.

"Don't know," Bloom said, as her and Gloom took aflutter to the air over the area where the bolt hit to look it over.

As the dust cloud dispersed, they were able to see just what had crashed into the ground which was a small, cute, harmless-looking plushie, lying limply on the ground; Tails Doll.

"...where did that come from?" Natal uttered, as she cautiously stepped closer to the doll, in spite of it being completely immobile.

"Awwww, it's so cute!" Bloom squealed, going over to pick up Tails Doll.

"Bloom, w-wait!" Gloom called, but couldn't stop her sister from cuddling the plushie.

For a while, it seemed like this was nothing more than an idyllic scene, as Bloom kept cuddling the plushie... when all of a sudden, Tails Doll's head span around to glare at the butterfly. *"HANDS OFF, HELLSPAWN."* he said in a deep, dark, demonic voice, as his head began shaking wildly, as if he was possessed.

Bloom released Tails Doll on the spot, but instead of being scared, she glowered at it. "Look who's talking!" she snapped.

"Bloom," Gloom urged in warning.

"...what's going on?" Natal inquired, as she alternated glances between Tails Doll and Bloom.

"...I'm talking right now." Tails Doll said, though his voice now lost the demonic quality, but still kept a genuinely creepy, dark tone to it, as he slowly floated up in the air, glaring at Bloom. *"And I'm telling you to leave this place; you're not welcome here."*

"What? You planing to do something to us if we don't leave?" Bloom asked, setting her hands on her hips with attitude.

"As a matter of fact, yes." Tails Doll said, as he stretched his arms out. *"I will show you a nightmare beyond compare; nothing you do will be able to save you from the absolute terror you would experience."* Then, he glanced at Gloom. *"So, tell me; what are little butterflies like you afraid of?"*

Gloom just grabbed Bloom by her arm. "Bloom, c'mon," she pleaded. "We d-don't want to start any t-t-trouble..."

Even if Bloom wouldn't usually comply, she did understand the point; Callous had told them to lay low until it was time, and if they had to fight Tails Doll by that time, then so be it. "Alright, we'll leave," Bloom grumbled, taking her sister as they started walking away.

"...good." Tails Doll mused, as his arms fell down.

"...what the hell just happened?" Natal uttered, as she looked at Tails Doll, who suddenly turned to face the bullfrog.

"Those people were bad guys *!"* Tails Doll suddenly said with his regular voice, as he fluttered over to Natal. *"Bad, bad people who wanted to do bad, bad things to you people! Big Bro told me to help you out!"*

"...Big Bro?" Natal inquired, before she shook her head. "But they were just kids. They didn't seem all that bad."

"But they could get REALLY bad!" Tails Doll retorted. " *Just trust me; those guys are trouble!"*

"Which guys are trouble?" That moment, other figures came out of the brush which turned out to be Brick and Tails. Brick stopped.

"Tails Doll? What are you doing here? Weren't you with Brownie?"

"I was, but Big Bro *wanted me to help you guys out!"* Tails Doll said, as he fluttered towards Brick. *"You see, these two butterflies are bad business, and Big Bro wanted me to make sure that they didn't get near you!"*

"...Tails Doll." Tails eventually said, as he looked at the doll with a serious look. "Tell me something; just what on earth is Metal Sonic planning?"

"Yeah, since when did Metal Sonic care about us anyway?" Brick asked. "Wasn't he trying to kill us before?"

"You're not listening!" Tails Doll said, as he began shaking his arms about. *"If you would let the butterflies with you, you'd become targeted by Callous!"*

"Callous?" Natal uttered, as she looked at Tails Doll. "Wasn't she with Metal?"

"Not anymore!" Tails Doll said, as he looked at Brick. *"Callous is a mean, mean lady, and even Big* Bro *doesn't want her around! If she had her way with you guys, that would make Big Bro sad!"*

"Whoa, just hold up," Brick said. "You're not making much sense here. I get the part where Callous is targeting us, and after all the crap we went through with her, I'd get that Metal would be irritated with her. But why in the world would he be sad that Callous got to us?"

"Because if you guys were gone..." Tails Doll uttered, as he scratched the back of his head. *"...then he'd have no fun at all!"*

"...really..." Tails nodded, as he closed his eyes. "...well, we'll have to be on the lookout for Callous and those butterflies. If even Metal Sonic tries intervening with her business, whatever she has planned can't be good."

"So Callous broke away from Metal and she's acting on her own..."

Brick murmured. "...I wonder if Brownie knew about this. I get the feeling she's keeping secrets from us again."

"Too bad that she's off training..." Natal muttered, just as she thought of something. "...say, Tails Doll." she said, as she looked at the plushie. "Where is she training, anyway?"

"I..." Tails Doll began, as he tapped his arm against his forehead. Then, he shrugged. "I can't tell you."

"Why can't you tell us, exactly?" Brick asked, eying the plushie suspiciously.

"Because it would be rude." Tails Doll said back to Brick.

"Uh-huh," Brick responded doubtfully; however he decided not to push it. "Well, I'm guessing that everyone's just about settled in, right Natal?"

"Yep; Striker and Jack are showing Rudy and Whisker around the clubhouse." Natal nodded, as she glanced back at the treehouse. "Proxy and Milo are probably still waiting in the hall. Should we go check on them?"

"Probably," Brick said, walking towards the humongous tree house.

At the Chaotix HQ, currently, Sage was sitting in Ani's room, holding her arms over the sleeping husky, as her eyes were closed. *I'll find a way to help you out, Ani.* she thought. *Even if Jill isn't here, I think I'll manage on my own.* As she thought that, she opened her eyes just a bit, to look down at Ani, who now had her plushie, Cocoa, lying beside her. Smiling a bit, she closed her eyes again.

Charmy entered in to check on things, and seeing Sage, he smiled. "I hope I'm not interrupting," he said.

"No, not at all." Sage replied, as she opened her eyes. "She's doing just fine, at the moment." Then, she glanced at Charmy. "I've been busy with Ani all day, so what's happened in the meantime?"

"A GUN chopper came to inspect the place, but luckily they listened to Wiper when he told them there was nothing here," Charmy said.

"However, I bear unfortunate news. There's telling that a 'Johnny' has come back...and that he's looking for you and your friends."

Hearing that name immediately caused Sage to get a panicked look, as she reeled away from Charmy. "...d-did you say... Johnny?" she uttered fearfully.

"Yes I did," Charmy said, observing her reaction. If Sage was afraid, then Johnny was certainly a very bad thing. "Sage, who is Johnny exactly?" he asked her curiously; "If you don't mind me asking, of course."

"...Johnny..." Sage began, as she calmed herself, trying not to seem as frightened. "...he was a character from our past; the GUN agents, you see. He proved to be an obstacle that not even me, King or Queen could overcome... in the end, a friend of ours, along with Wiper, killed him. But... he's returned from the dead? How?"

"Apparently GUN has found some way of reviving him," Charmy said, rubbing his chin. "But what is to happen if he found out you and your friends were all hiding in CDA HQ?"

"...I don't even want to think about it." Sage said, as she shuddered. "Listen... Johnny is nothing short of a monster. He doesn't care about anyone other than himself, as long as he can murder people. There isn't a single shred of good in that person's soul."

"I can see that from your expression," Charmy nodded. "Sounds like he wants payback for whatever events transpired in your past." He glanced at Ani and knew the situation would be too dangerous for her to be involved; especially if Hunter knew. "Do you have any plans of taking care of Ani before that time possibly comes?"

"Not at the moment." Sage admitted, as she looked at Ani as well. "But I wouldn't do much good in a battle against Johnny; GUN gave him some form of mental implant that makes him immune to my powers." Sighing, she raised her arms over Ani again. "The only thing I can do is pray that he doesn't come before I can help her."

"Say, what happens if Ani wakes up?" Charmy asked, curious of that as well.

"I'm not sure." Sage said, as she kept her mind focused on Ani. "But I can only guess that it's not something we want on our hands. Well, she's going to stay asleep for a while, anyway..."

"Alright then," Charmy said, heading for the door. "I'll leave you to tend to her then."

Outside in the hidden brush, a hole of darkness opened in the ground. Callous and Johnny popped out of it, and an instant afterward it sealed shut.

"Well, here we are," Callous said, gesturing to the building they saw from behind the bushes.

"Is that it?" Johnny scoffed, as he rubbed his head a bit; the trip through the dark had affected him a bit. "Hmph... well, time to take out the trash." he said with a smirk, as he began making his way towards the building.

"Heh," Callous decided to sit back and watch as Johnny took care of his business, leaning on a tree while she watched him walk to the HQ.

Currently in the living room, Wiper, Queen, King and Miser were sitting, discussing amongst themselves. "I can't believe it..." King muttered, as he had his arms folded, growling. "To think that they'd go that far..."

"I can see why they would even consider such a project, though..." Miser said, as she closed her eyes with a sigh. "For a moment, during that fight..." she began, as she briefly looked at King, to see if it was alright for her to continue.

"But that opens up a whole new sleuth of problems." Queen muttered. "Sage's psychokinesis did nothing, and he was actively shrugging off King's electrical attacks. I guess only Miser is really able to stand against him, and that's only because she can't die..."

With a surly look, Wiper glanced out of the window while the other three were talking. At that moment, however, he noticed someone walking towards the building. "...oh no..."

Hunter passed by, and noticed Wiper's concern he questioned it. "What's wrong?" That wasn't until he looked out the window too that he saw the problem. Then he grew eerily silent.

"Huh? What're you all..." King muttered, as he, Queen and Miser glanced out the window as well, letting them see just who was approaching. "...son of a bitch... it's him!"

"Hey!" Johnny called from outside, as he cracked his knuckles. "GUN Renegades! Get out here, and let's get this over with!"

"Damn..." Queen muttered, as she gritted her teeth. "How did he find us so quickly?"

"Hey... doesn't he seem a bit young?" Miser pointed out. "He looks just like he did fifteen years ago..." However, at that point, Wiper suddenly ran towards the door. "Dawn?"

"Everyone, stay inside!" Wiper called, as he glanced at the other agents. "I'm serious... none of you follow me!" Then, he exited the building, closing the door behind him.

"Don't follow him he says," Hunter growled. Personally, he didn't remember much of that night himself like the rest of the group did, but he was going to storm after Wiper…

…and then he stopped suddenly.

Ani, he reminded himself in thought.

"Don't tell me that he's honestly..." Miser uttered, as she looked out the window, where she could see Wiper approaching Johnny.

"Oh, he is..." King uttered, as he clenched his fist, before moving towards the door. "Someone's gotta give him back-" Before he could finish his sentence, however, Queen suddenly rushed towards the door, blocking King from going through. "Hn?"

"He told us not to follow him." Queen said, as she looked at King with a serious look. "We'll have to have faith..."

"...fine." King growled, as he looked away. "...but if it looks like he'll

be killed, I'm going out."

As that went on, outside, Johnny grinned as he saw Wiper. "Well, now. There's a face I didn't expect to see." he said in a cocky tone, as he cracked his neck.

"I don't know how you were revived, Johnny..." Wiper muttered, as he stopped moving. "...but you'd better leave... or else."

"Or else what? You get me between the eyes, like you did all those years ago?" Johnny said with a cocky grin, as he pointed at his scar. "I'm not gonna let you get that chance, and this time, you don't have Desperado around to save your ass."

Up high above, Charmy peered through a window, and Boomer accompanied him.

"Newt, come here," she motioned toward the window as she watched Wiper and Johnny. "You need to see this too."

"What is it?" Newt asked, as he looked through the window as well, only to gawk at the sight. "Hey, isn't that Jack? What's he doin', squaring off against Wiper?"

"Well, I hope you're ready, Wiper." Johnny said with a sneer, before he ran towards Wiper, who had taken his fighting stance. "You may have grown up, but you're still no match for me!" Then, he reeled his hand back, preparing for a punch.

However, as he threw the punch, Wiper moved his head to the side, before instinctively shooting his own hand forward, piercing Johnny's body. Upon seeing that, however, both of the combatants looked at it in surprise. "...did I just..."

"...the hell?" Grunting, Johnny pushed Wiper away, before backing away a bit, looking at his new wound. "...lucky shot, that's all." he muttered, before smirking. "Good luck doing that again."

"No, that's not Jack, Newt," Charmy said, somewhat baffled that it DID look like him. "According to Wiper, that's Johnny."

"Johnny?" Boomer asked, eying her boss strangely. "Who the hell is

Johnny, and why are they fighting?"

"Long story short, Johnny wants revenge for something that Wiper and his friends did to him," Charmy said. "And Johnny seems serious enough to take their lives as his payback."

"WHAT?" Boomer uttered. "Well, how did he find the HQ? How did he know they were here?"

"Couldn't have been GUN, because we just shoed them off not five minutes ago," Charmy said in eager deduction. "Our little Johnny had some outside help."

"I think I know who that is, y'know..." Newt muttered, as he watched the two again. "...but he ain't gonna win against Wiper, y'know!"

"Alright, let's try that again!" Once more, Johnny rushed at Wiper, both of his hands clenched. "Try and survive this!" he yelled, before throwing a flurry of punches at the snake.

However, as he threw them, Wiper gracefully parried the punches, using the flat side of his hands to push the punches away before they could hit him. *What's going on...?* he thought, before he aimed a kick at the lion, which sent him reeling back. *His attacks... they don't feel that strong! Is he holding back?*

"Kkh... cheeky little-" Johnny growled, as he ran at Wiper again, punching furiously at the snake, but no matter how furious his blows were, he couldn't connect a single blow against the snake. *The hell? He oughta be dead by now! What's wrong with me?*

A whistle suddenly filled the air, hoping to catch everyone's attention.

And it did, as it got Johnny to stop punching at Wiper, before looking around him irritably. "Alright, what is it *now?* " he yelled.

"Who knew you'd get so snippy so quickly?" And out came Callous, which startled a great many and brought all the more dread.

"All I wanted was to lend a hand or two. That so hard, Johnny?" she snickered.

"There's his outside help," Charmy concluded as he glared sharply at the ewe. "Callous!"

"Tsch..." Johnny grunted, as he glanced at Callous, before he glared at Wiper. "...just stand back for a bit. I'll have him dead in no time." Then, he threw another punch at Wiper, who took it this time, as he was too startled by Callous' entrance to notice.

However, the punch only caused Wiper to skid a few feet away, which surprised both him and Johnny. "...was that it?" Wiper uttered in an honestly surprised tone.

"Kkh... just die!" Before he could be stopped, Johnny rushed at Wiper again, throwing more punches, but Wiper was quick to evade those blows, before he aimed a kick at Johnny's face.

"I don't get it!" King said, as he watched the two duke it out. "They're fighting just about evenly! In fact, I think Wiper's got the advantage! What happened? Did Johnny lose some muscle?"

"No..." Miser uttered, as something dawned on her. "...he's still as strong as when we last faced him... but that was fifteen years ago. We've grown even stronger since those days."

"So in other words..." Queen muttered, as she watched the fight. "...we have a chance."

Hunter gritted his teeth, "We'll have a chance if Callous doesn't do anything to Johnny to make him stronger!" And before anyone could stop the wolf, he ran towards the door to get outside.

"Please Johnny, you're embarrassing me," Callous yawned, watching as the fight went on.

"Tsch- I didn't ask for your opinion yet!" Johnny retorted, just as he avoided a karate chop from Wiper. That, however, allowed him to grab hold of Wiper's arm. "You're mine." Then, with a heave, Johnny slammed the snake head-first into the ground, actually cracking it up.

At that point, however, Wiper suddenly spun around, knocking Johnny away from him, before hissing. "...I don't know why, but I get

the feeling that you're not as tough as I recall." he said, before he rushed at the lion. "That means that I can do this!" Then, before Johnny could evade the attack, Wiper began rapidly stabbing his hands forward, striking numerous pressure points around Johnny's body.

However, even with several wounds now on his body, Johnny stood his ground, coughing blood. "...it doesn't hurt." he spat, as he glared at Wiper. "You may have grown tougher, but it still doesn't hurt. Maybe you should try lifting a few more weights?"

"Maybe you aught to try taking someone's advice, tiger."

A black hand clamped down on Johnny's shoulder. It was Callous' hand coated in Corruption, leaking onto Johnny's shoulder and starting to crawl on him; whether he wanted it to or not. "Wiper's afraid of a new thing now…" she sneered with an evil grin.

Hunter made it outside, only to see what was going on. "No!" he screamed in despair.

"Hn?" Glancing at the black ooze crawling across his shoulder, Johnny shot a look at Callous. "What are you doing?"

...Corruption! Gritting his teeth, Wiper ran right towards Callous and Johnny, pulling his arms back. "Let go of him!" he yelled, as he shot his arm forward, intending to impale Johnny's body.

But Callous simply yanked Johnny aside effortlessly away from the snake. "Listen Johnny," she said. "I can make you stronger, but only if you don't fight it." She gestured to the ooze which had now coated his upper chest and was going onto his arms.

"YOU BITCH!" Hunter screamed, running to punch Callous.

However, she just whirled around Hunter and gave him a massively strong kick to the back of his head, knocking him on the ground easily. "Save your energy, hound dog," she murmured.

"Don't fight what? The tar you're covering me with?" Johnny inquired, as he looked at his body. "Just what is this stuff, anyway?"

"Tsch..." Wiper grunted, as he glared at Callous. *As long as she's holding onto him, I can't finish him off...*

"Yo, Callous!" At that point, right out of nowhere, a sphere of electricity rammed Johnny's side, with enough force to successfully separate him from Callous' grip. "Hands off the lion, if you know what's good for ya!" As it turned out, King had exited the building, and had been responsible for that attack. "Now why don't you just scram?"

Coughing, Johnny glared at King. "It got some more punch than before... but it still didn't hurt, King..."

"Because I'm just a little mistress of mischief!" Callous chuckled. "I can't very well mind my own business, can I? I have to butt in everyone else's!" Then she smirked at Johnny, who was now almost completely covered in the tar except for his head. "Besides, now he can not only get the payback he wants, but now he'll be virtually immortal to your attacks."

"Tsch... we'll see about that!" King yelled, before he shot a massive stream of electricity from his hands, aimed right at Johnny, pinning him to the ground. "Hunter! Get something big, and crush him! He won't be able to move, while I'm pinning him down!"

Growling, Johnny glanced at Callous, with a look that didn't seem to mind the electricity at all. "Would you just tell me what this tar is supposed to be?"

"It's called Corruption, Johnny," Callous said, now that the tar was reaching over his mouth and finally covering his head. "It's the most powerful thing you'll ever feel…"

Hunter was frantic uprooting a tree with his telekinesis and throwing it at the lion, hoping to crush him before the Corruption took its effect, and who knows how bad things could get.

"You'll feel like a god, Johnny," Callous' voice continued hauntingly.

Just as Callous uttered those words... the tree landed straight on Johnny, seemingly crushing the lion.

"Oh yeah!" King laughed, as he pumped his fist in the air. "Hah! Was that it, Callous? Was that the 'godly' power of Corruption?" he said brashly, as he kept laughing. "And that went by much easier than I would have expected!"

Wiper, however, kept his gaze at the tree. "...wait." he muttered, as he noticed something. "...uh oh..."

"What? What's wrong?" King inquired, as he glanced at the tree... and saw it suddenly blow up into so small parts that the shrapnel was practically invisible. "...eh?"

"Even without this stuff... that didn't hurt..." As it turned out, Johnny was standing on his feet now, his arm raised, as it was coated in a dark aura. "...but man, this made it feel like a feather was thrown at me," he added, before he grinned.

Callous let out a laugh, "Yeah baby! Johnny's back in business!"

Boomer clasped her hands over her mouth in horror, while Charmy stared in stunned shock.

"Well, this can't be good," the old bee muttered.

Chapter 38

WARNING: There's some content at the end of the chapter that would likely raise the normal rating of the story. Please proceed with caution...

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"Damn it!" Hunter screamed. Then he ran after Johnny and threw a punch. "I won't let it happen!"

However, just as Hunter rushed at Johnny, the lion simply tilted his head, letting the punch sail right past him. "Put a sock in it, Hunter." Then, he reeled back for a punch of his own. "Say hi to Bliss for me!"

"You can say it to her yourself!" Before Johnny could throw that punch, King unleashed another volley of electricity, pushing him away from Hunter. "I don't care what it takes; I'm not gonna let you kill any of my comrades!"

"Oh, I'm shaking!" Johnny laughed, as even though the electricity was pushing him back, he looked as if he wasn't being fired at in the first place. "Oh, wait; no, I'm not!" Then, he began slowly moving towards the electricity, slowly moving towards Hunter again, as he grinned wickedly.

"Crap…" Hunter uttered.

Callous was impressed. Johnny was doing a pretty good job harnessing the Corruption; much better than Cal would've done actually.

It was that minute that she suddenly felt a piece of her frizzy hair lopped off in a split second.

Next thing they knew, a certain cyber simian was standing on the field with new katanas drawn.

"What's HE doing here?" Boomer roared in utter rage. After all, she hadn't forgotten at all what Cal did to her.

At the moment he appeared, everything seemed to stop; King halted his barrage of electricity, and Johnny even stopped advancing, as everyone glanced at Cal. "...and who is this?" Johnny said, as he raised an eyebrow.

Calculate... Wiper thought, as he looked at Cal, just as he hissed. "What do you want here?" he uttered.

"I was sent here, believe it or not," Cal said. "Don't ask why." Then he looked over at Johnny. "You're Johnny, I presume?"

"...yeah, that's it." Johnny nodded, as he folded his arms. "What's it to you?"

Cal then got into a fighter's stance. "Well, that makes things simpler. I'm afraid I'm going to have to take you down."

"Well Cal, I didn't think you'd show up," Callous said, smirking.

"I'm not here for you, Callous," Cal snapped sternly.

Hearing that, however, actually got Johnny to chuckle, though he mockingly "tried" making it look like he wasn't trying to laugh. "Sorry, I don't think I heard that right." he said, as he shook his head. "You, take *me* down?" Then, he gave Cal an evil look. "Why don't you come and try?"

He was sent to take out Johnny? Wiper thought, as he looked at Cal. *How? He shouldn't be able to know about him! Unless... no, that can't be...*

"I won't try; I will do it," Cal said. Then he came at the lion with a swipe of a katana.

However, Johnny simply grabbed the blade when it came at him, as he slowly cracked his neck, whilst looking at Cal. "If that's the case, then you aughtta put more effort into it!" Then, he gave Cal a solid kick to the chest, which would knock him away from the lion.

Flying through the air by the kick, Cal's tail grabbed a nearby tree branch, hoisting him around on its perch. "Maybe, but you aught to keep that big mouth of yours shut before I rip if off," and leaping high into the air, Cal came to strike Johnny down from above.

With a smirk, Johnny leapt back before Cal could get an opportunity to strike him. "Tough words. But can you back them up?" Before Cal could move, Johnny rushed at the monkey, slamming his arm into the monkey's neck with a clothesline strike.

"OOF!" That certainly was a good blow on Cal, and he staggered backward trying to breathe again, before he glared at him. "Of course I can back them up," he said, charging after Johnny again with a cross-slash.

However, Johnny quickly blocked the cross-slash by raising his own arms, letting them absorb the attack, preventing them from reaching his body. "Somehow, I doubt that." he said, before quickly grabbing Cal's arms, aiming a head butt at the monkey.

"I'm getting a sense of deja vu, here..." King muttered, as he watched the fight between the two. "He's pretty much immortal! How the hell are we gonna stop him now?"

"..." Blinking, Wiper glanced back at the HQ, as something hit him. "...if that's the case..." With a nod, he made a run for the HQ, with one thing on his mind. *I don't think he's immortal... and Miser should be enough to send that message home!*

"Now Wiper's running back in the building," Boomer said. "What's that about?"

"He might be running to get Miser," Charmy said. "But I'm not so sure her own immortality can stand up to Corruption…it's proven to be quite hazardous." He turned around and went towards Boomer's door then. "I need to warn Sage so we can move Ani; in case things get worse."

Meanwhile, Cal was knocked off his own feet by that head butt. *Damn it,* he thought. *That Corruption's made him too strong…* He knew of the events that happened because he had been stationed

nearby under the influence of his cloaking device.

"Aaw, what's wrong?" Johnny said mockingly, as he approached Cal, cracking his knuckles. "Don't tell me that you can't do better than that?"

At that point, King noticed something; namely, the steel compartment lodged in Johnny's chest. *What is that?* he thought. *...don't tell me...*

While Cal tried to get to his feet, Hunter started running for Johnny; having noticed the steel compartment in Johnny's middle as well. "Hey Johnny!" He said. "Why don't you show us what's in that compartment!" And he tried to grab Johnny.

At that point, Wiper and Miser rushed out of the HQ, stopping only when they saw Hunter try and grab Johnny. "Hunter, wait!" Miser called.

"!" Before Hunter could grab him, Johnny quickly ducked underneath the wolf, so he missed. "I can tell you, but first, you'll have to sit down!" he said, before aiming a kick at Hunter's gut from his current position.

"AGH!" Hunter couldn't move to dodge it, so he was kicked right into the ground without the strength to get back up.

"Heh..." Cracking his neck, Johnny looked from Hunter to Cal, before looking back at the wolf. "...just stay there. I'll get right back to you." Then, he approached Cal, as he raised his fist, preparing to slam it down on the monkey. "Say good night, now, chimp."

However, before he could attack Cal, someone grabbed his arm. "Leave him alone." As it turned out, it was Miser, who glared angrily at the lion.

"...oh. Little Miser..." Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at the rhino. "Still not dead, yet?"

"Nope, and I'm not done either!" Since Miser took Johnny's attention, Cal decided to take the opportunity to try and cut him with a katana.

As Cal tried that, however, Johnny quickly grabbed the blade with his free hand, glaring at the monkey. "...honestly, you people make me sick." Then, in a surprising bout of strength, he managed to knock away both Cal and Miser at the same time. "Can't you just see that I'm superior to you guys? Just lie down and let me kill you; this is really starting to get pathetic."

Meanwhile, Charmy burst into the room with Sage and the sleeping Ani. "News flash Sage, Johnny's here," Charmy said. "Not only that, but Callous seemed to give him a little support!"

Blinking, Sage glanced at Charmy. "He's already here?" she uttered, before looking at Ani. "...guess we have to relocate her, for the time being. I don't want her anywhere near him..."

"They don't really listen, Johnny," Callous said. She was amused at watching the fight; and her eye was locked on Johnny with even more interest than before. "It just takes patience to kill them."

"You're not going to kill anyone!" roared Hunter, who finally got back on his feet. "I've got too much to loose!" And he rushed at Callous, but the ewe stepped aside, and when one of her whips was in her hands, she whiplashed Hunter down to the ground.

"Like your daughter, Hunter?" she said. "Please, I've heard enough."

That moment, Sage and Charmy would strangely see Ani flinching noticeably.

"Hm?" Charmy was bewildered by that.

Seeing that, Sage's eyes widened. "...don't tell me that she's waking up already?" she said, as she looked at the husky. *Her subconscious shouldn't wake up this soon! She's a lot stronger than I expected...*

"You stay away from him!" King roared, as all of a sudden, a massive jolt of electricity slammed into Callous, pushing her away from Hunter.

"Hmph..." Watching that, Johnny looked down at Cal, before grinning. "Ready to die?"

"You first!" At that point, Miser tried slamming her fists down on Johnny, but the lion easily caught her hands before she could reach him. "Kkh..."

Ani, even though she appeared to be asleep, was clenching her teeth. She was rising out of the spell, and the ability to think was beginning to work again. *Dad…he's in trouble! I can feel it!*

"Try telling him not to act out of his place then, Twilight," Callous sneered, as she also whipped down King brutally.

Cal stared at Johnny's steel compartment, and with an idea forming in his mind, he tried to cut it open with his katana while Johnny was busy with Miser.

However, as he slashed, Johnny suddenly raised his leg, letting that absorb the blow. "Honestly..." he muttered, just as he heaved Miser right over him, causing her to crash right on top of Cal. "...is that all?"

"Ungh... sorry..." Miser groaned, as she got on her feet, before glaring at Johnny.

With a growl, King got back on his feet, before glaring at Callous. "You just stay right there, and I'll make you pay!" he said, before electricity began covering his entire body. Then, he rushed right at Callous, before delivering a punch with quite the explosive force.

Watching Ani stir, Sage quickly glanced at Charmy. "We should move; I doubt that she's going to be happy when she wakes up!"

"What do you mean?" Charmy asked uneasily, although his answer was shortly answered.

A demonic air suddenly filled the room…and Ani's eyes popped open…

"You'd hit a girl, Twilight? Shame on you," Callous taunted, tsking. She simply batted the fist away with her own hand, and she was about to strike him down, when she stopped.

Her senses picked up something…unnerving.

BOOM! A wall of the Chaotix HQ building was blown apart, or rather plowed through. It was enough to stop everything going on the field, and attract attention from everyone.

"What the hell?" Cal uttered, looking at the dust cloud that loomed over the broken wall.

"...hn?" Blinking, King looked at the dust cloud as well. "What the..."

"...hell is that?" Johnny inadvertly finished, as he turned around to look at the dust cloud.

That kind of presence... Wiper thought, as he looked at the dust cloud as well. *...just what is it?*

Hunter tried to look up, and what he saw probably surprised him the most.

Once the dust cloud cleared, it revealed a large figure and soon, the figure was identified. It wasn't his little daughter, but a tremendous and terrifying looking beast.

Ani was a Werewolf.

" ***Leave my dad and his friends alone!"*** Ani growled ferociously.

"Is that…is that Ani?" Boomer gasped, looking at her.

"...dad?" Johnny uttered, as a smile crept over his lips, before he glanced at Hunter. "...so, you went ahead and got yourself laid! I'm impressed, Hunter!" he said with a laugh.

"Is... is that really Ani?" Miser uttered, as she watched the hulking beast.

Ani looked at Johnny with a deadly glare since he heard him laugh. ***"You look like the kind of guy I'd pick out of my teeth when I was done with them,"*** she grunted. ***"If you don't leave my dad and his friends alone, I'll assure you that'll be what happens."***

So this is what happens when she's touched by Corruption, Callous thought in amusement.

"Oh, is that right?" Johnny chuckled, as he motioned for Ani to come at him. "Then why don't you try and stop me, daddy's little angel?" he said semi-mockingly.

" ***I don't even need to come over there."***

In a strange occurrence of events, Ani launched a fist forward, and as a result, her arm stretched like rubber as the fist headed right for Johnny's face.

Blinking, Johnny quickly moved out of the fist's way before it could hit him. "Well, now..." he muttered, before he grinned. "You're just full of surprises." Then, he cracked his knuckles. "Now, let's see just what little werewolf-girls are made of!" Then, he ran right at Ani, reeling his fist back for a furious punch.

Even if the punch hit Ani square in the stomach, she didn't move an inch. Heck, she didn't even flinch. She only continued to look at Johnny, as a crooked grin appeared. ***"I can tell ya that they're made out of really strong stuff!"*** she chuckled, just as she suddenly whacked Johnny away with a large hand.

"That didn't affect her?" Cal uttered in amazement.

Even as he was whacked away, Johnny didn't seem affected at all, as he looked back at Ani, as he cracked his neck. "...not bad. I actually felt that one." he said with a grin, before clenching his hands into fists. "But if you think that's gonna take me out, you've got another thing coming!"

" ***I'm not that stupid, you moron,"*** Ani growled. ***"I know it'll take more."***

Callous stepped up to the plate then. "Well, then how about this?" and one of her whips were already on their way toward Ani.

"NO!" Hunter cried.

But there was no need for daddy to worry, because Ani caught the whip with her hand, and then yanked. Callous was hurled into a tree, while Ani tossed the whip away, dusting her hands off the Corruption energy that had been around the thing.

"No way," Cal said, observing the fact that Ani wiped away Corruption like it was nothing.

"..woah..." King uttered in awe, as he watched Ani. "...how'd she do that?"

"Then let's not waste any time." Johnny chuckled, as he looked at his fist, just as it was covered in a dark aura. "You know, your dad had nothing on me when I wasn't powered up like this. Now that I am... what chance do you think you have?" Then, he ran right at Ani again, aiming another punch with the fist covered in darkness.

Ani caught this punch this time, and the darkness disappeared once it touched Ani's hand. ***"You have no idea what my mom went through, you ignorant son of a bitch,"*** Ani muttered. Then she socked Johnny in the face and knocked him off his feet.

"What in the world is going on? It's almost as if…" Boomer suddenly made a very shocking connection. "…Corruption doesn't affect her."

At that point Newt heard something from the computer. "H-hey, it just found an emerald signal, Boomer!" he said, as he approached the console, seeing just where the signal was coming from. "It's... coming from right outside?"

"That steel compartment!" Boomer blurted, knowing immediately. "It's in Johnny's steel compartment!"

Coughing, Johnny got on his feet pretty quickly, as he wiped blood away from his lips. "Too bad; I didn't know her to begin with." he muttered, before grinning. "So, this stuff doesn't work on you, huh? Then I think I have something that will."

" ***If it's threatening my dad, then you're even lower than you're given credit for,"*** Ani said.

"Oh, don't worry; I'm not gonna hurt your daddy..." Johnny began, as he grinned, just as the light on the compartment began blinking rapidly.

"But why would it be in there?" Newt inquired, as he looked back outside.

"...but believe me; when I'm done with you, you'll want me to switch targets!" Then, Johnny suddenly vanished, before reappearing above Ani. Then, he furiously stomped his feet down on her, with even more force than before, knocking her to the ground.

"The Captain said that he was brought back to life," Boomer said. "I think they did it with a Chaos Emerald and after that move he did there, now I'm sure it's in that compartment."

Ani was lying face down in the ground, and after awhile, she finally got up, spitting dirt out. ***"That's supposed to intimidate me?"*** she grumbled. ***"No, that just makes you annoying..."*** She grabbed Johnny with her humongous hands and brought him to her face; nose-to-nose in fact. ***"You're annoying enough with your arrogance, you know."***

"Yeah?" Johnny chuckled, as he didn't seem all that pained from being restrained by Ani. "Well, that's just a damn shame, ain't it?" Just at that point, something exploded around him; some form of aura, which was strong enough to knock away both of Ani's hands. "Now, just stay still!" At that point, he began delivering a flurry of punches against Ani, each of the punches seemingly exploding upon impact.

The punches were pretty brutal, and Ani couldn't stop Johnny from punching her so.

Charmy and Sage appeared out of the hole in the wall then, and encountered the scene. Charmy grew very concerned about Ani as he watched.

Finally, Ani just pushed Johnny away, and with her werewolf strength, he was pushed away a good distance. ***"I'll admit those hurt,"*** she said. ***"But I've been through worse."*** Ani's hands rose and once she clapped, it shot a devastating psychic sound wave at Johnny; which was the tele-clap. It was so bad that it tore up the ground it shot over.

However, Johnny didn't budge, even as the wave rocketed towards him. "Is that it?" he scoffed, as the light on the compartment began blinking rapidly. "How disappointing!" Then, he suddenly let out a

massive roar, which created another sound wave that collided right into the wave Ani had created. "Not only this Corruption stuff... but the power-up GUN gave me, too; I've never felt stronger!"

" ***You're real cheap, you know that?"*** Ani grumbled. ***"It's no fun fighting bad guys like you that bend the rules; especially that Callous chick."***

"And speak of the devil," Callous popped out of the tree and started running at Ani, intending to take her down with her scythe.

When she cut Ani, it freaked Hunter out even more causing the wolf to jump to his feet. "ANI!" he screamed helplessly.

" ***Ow,"*** complained Ani, rubbing the Corruption off of the cut on her arm like dust.

Callous grew even more interested. "Just how can you do that?" she asked.

" ***None of your business,"*** Ani growled.

"...not that I'm not enjoying this, but..." Johnny began, as he cracked his neck. "I got a job to do. We'll finish it later, wolf-girl." Then, he glanced at King. "Now, let's see how long it'll take!" Then, he rushed at King with blinding speed.

"I don't think so!" At that point, the ground in front of King suddenly erupted upwards, creating a wall that blocked Johnny from approaching King. "My powers may not work on you, Johnny..." Sage said, as she had taken flight, just above the others. "...but it doesn't mean that I can't fight you!"

"Sage..." Johnny muttered, as he glanced at her. "Why bother? You won't be able to take me out!"

" ***Why don't you just shut your pie hole, jungle cat?"*** Ani snarled.

"I agree," Cal said, raising his katanas.

With that, both of them went after Johnny this time. Ani suddenly grabbed Johnny and threw him into the air, while Cal kicked on the

jet boosters and shot after Johnny to slash him in midair.

However, when Cal attempted that, Johnny was quick to grab the blades Cal slashed with, before suddenly shattering them in his grip. "Look, no offense, chimp... but you're out of your league." Then, he gave Cal a powerful kick, which sent him rocketing to the ground.

Cal remained motionless on the ground after that attack, even as Callous walked up to him. "Look where we are now," she chuckled deviously. "Even after the fun we had."

Cal clenched his teeth. "Go bug someone else Callous. I have no business with you anymore."

"Is that so?" Callous asked, raising an eyebrow. "Even if he shut down your lust, you still possess Corruption…and sooner or later it will take its effect again."

"Cal, what is she talking about?" Hunter asked. "You didn't…" A disgusted look crossed his face when he made a connection. "Cal, you're really twisted!"

"It wasn't my fault!" Cal protested, turning red. "She was moving in on me!"

"What's this, now?" Johnny inquired, as he landed back on the ground, glancing at Cal. "He's an old flame of yours, Callous?"

At that point, however, Johnny and Callous were surrounded by the other GUN agents, all of them glaring at them. "Callous... I'd suggest that you get the *hell* out of here." Sage uttered with a venomous tone. "And take him with you." she added, motioning to Johnny.

"Or what?" Callous asked sassily.

" ***Or we'll fry your hair,"*** Ani said, with a big sharp teethed grin.

"...and?" Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at the group. "Come on; the only one who stands a remote chance is the werewolf-girl, and who knows when she'll revert?"

"We'll overpower you." Miser said, as she glared at them. "Now

leave."

Callous really didn't care either way. She wasn't afraid of them, but she was getting bored with them after all.

However, it wasn't until she saw something on the top of the HQ building that it caused her to make a decision.

For the first time, they saw true fear in Callous, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She stepped away from the HQ cautiously. "… fine, I'll leave," she uttered.

"Huh?" Blinking, Johnny glanced at Callous. "You serious?"

"...well, go ahead, then." Sage muttered, even though she found it strange how quickly Callous changed tone. "Leave."

Callous stood there a moment more, staring in fear at whatever stood atop the HQ. Then she finally turned and walked into the darkness in the ground. "Come on Johnny," she said.

"...fine." Johnny muttered, before glaring at King. "But don't think we're done yet." Then, he followed Callous into the darkness.

"...good riddance." King muttered, as he closed his eyes.

"...but just who could have..." Wiper muttered, as he glanced up at the HQ as well.

Once everyone looked, who they saw surprised them; mostly Hunter, for standing at the top of the CDA HQ was Goddess.

Only Boomer and Newt had no idea who they were looking at, and the fact that everyone was staring at the HQ was disturbing. "What are they looking at?" Boomer said.

Hunter growled. It was the woman that he had trusted the late Melody's life to, which angered him even more to see her.

Cal also remembered this woman…he had caught a glimpse of her before in Westopolis, but back then he thought he was imagining things. Now he knew he wasn't crazy. Even with the blinking he did,

this woman did not disappear this time.

Even Ani felt a sense of familiarity about this woman, but she was clueless how or why that was.

"...who's that?" King uttered, as he looked at the woman. "Sage, check up on her."

Nodding, Sage looked up at the woman, only to widen her eyes in surprise. "...I can't read her." she said as calmly as she could. "I don't know why, but I can't read her!"

"What?" Blinking, Wiper tilted his head. *Sage can't read her... who is that woman?*

Goddess stepped up to the edge of the building and off, floating down to the ground smoothly and gracefully. Then she walked toward Ani.

When Hunter realized this, he bolted over and stood between his werewolf daughter and this strange woman. "NO!" he screamed. "I WON'T LET YOU TAKE HER FROM ME!"

"Hunter?" Cal was confused.

Goddess stopped and looked upon Hunter with pity. "I won't take your daughter away, Midnight," she said.

"How do I know that?" Hunter snarled. "You didn't even save Melody! You let her die, didn't you?"

Melody? Hearing that, Wiper approached the woman, standing in front of Hunter. "...so you're the one Hunter talked about. The woman who was going to save Melody..."

"Huh?" Hearing that, King approached the woman as well. "What's this about, anyway? Just who are you?" he asked, as he folded his arms.

"My name is Goddess," she spoke, "and if I hadn't been there, Midnight, then both Melody and your daughter would've died horribly."

Hunter eased up, but he didn't completely let up from his anger. "What do you mean?"

"I wanted to save Melody," she said, "But she pleaded that I save your daughter instead. Melody…wouldn't have been able to live with the memory of a daughter that died before her first breath of air, and I could not have been able to save both of them." Then she glared at Hunter. "Don't you realize she willingly sacrificed herself to allow your daughter to live?"

"Hey, don't put it like that!" King said, as he gave Goddess a scowl. "He just met his daughter a few days ago! How do you expect someone to be able to piece that together, when they've been rendered-"

"King." Wiper said, as he gave the tiger a look. "We shouldn't get involved; this has nothing to do with us."

Wiper was right, because Hunter was beginning to feel ashamed.

"Because Melody was infected with Corruption, so was Ani. Her premature birth was risky, so when I delivered her, I made sure to give her some of my strength," Goddess continued, looking up at Ani with a sympathetic look. "That's why the Corruption was ineffective, because she is protected by my power." Goddess walked past everyone to reach a stunned Ani, and set a glowing hand on her forehead. "You may go back to sleep now, Anistasia," she said.

The instant that Were-Ani closed her eyes she started to shrink in size. She reverted back to little Ani, with ragged ripped clothes.

"...Goddess, wasn't it?" Sage uttered, as she glanced at her. "I'm unable to read your mind... just what are you?" she inquired.

At first, Goddess just glanced at Sage. Then she started walking away from them. "I am a messenger," she said without looking back.

Hunter suddenly thought of something. He remembered that this was Jill's mother as well. "What about your daughter?" he called, which actually stopped Goddess in her tracks.

"...daughter?" Blinking, Wiper glanced at Hunter. "Hunter, what are you talking about?"

Hunter didn't answer. He was waiting for Goddess to answer his question first.

Goddess looked back at Hunter. "She has her own duties Midnight. It's not my place to help her." Then when everyone blinked, she was gone without a trace.

"Daughter?" Cal inquired suspiciously. "Hunter, what do you mean?"

Hunter finally turned to all of them. "That was Jill's mother."

"Say WHAT?" King uttered in shock, as he looked at Hunter in disbelief.

"...that is a major coincidence." Wiper noted, as he looked at Hunter. "I take it that Jill told you that?"

"Yes, but when Jill told me, she was unsure that I was talking about her mother," Hunter said. "After what just happened, though, I'm positive that was her."

"If that was Jill's mother…" Cal murmured. "…then what does that mean for Callous?"

"...I would reckon that, on a technicality, Callous considers Goddess as her mother as well." Wiper proposed. "I could be wrong, but it's the best guess I can fathom."

"Hmm..." Sage nodded, before she glanced at Cal. "...so, that leaves you."

"WHAT?" Cal kicked on his rocket boosters. "I just remembered I have to be somewhere else. BYE!" And he was gone nearly as fast as Goddess was, taking off in flight across the sky.

Hunter just shook his head, "Good for nothing…"

Sage couldn't help but chuckle, as she watched Cal fly off. "That was a bit funny..." she mused, before she glanced at Ani. *...she's*

asleep again... she thought.

Hunter trudged wearily over to her and picked her up. "Let's take her back inside," he uttered, although he almost would've fell on the first step if Charmy hadn't come.

"I'll take Ani," He said, chuckling. "You need to rest, again."

"I suppose most of us could use some rest." Wiper muttered, as he folded his arms. "...but Johnny being with Callous has me worried."

"Tsch... to be honest, I can't make up my mind of who's the bigger monster of the two." King muttered, as he and Miser walked over to Hunter, helping him on his feet.

"And now that they're together, it's going to be even *more* hell than we wanted," Hunter groaned.

"Well, nothing else to do but to suck it up, for the time being." King muttered, as he and Miser began carrying Hunter to the HQ. "Now let's get some rest; I need to take my mind off this."

As Sage followed them, Wiper remained where he stood, as he glanced at the spot Cal had been on. *...why did he come here?* he thought, as he folded his arms. *He said that he was sent here... what is* Metal Sonic *thinking?*

"Wiper, are you coming?" Charmy called.

"...yeah, sure." Wiper nodded, as he followed Charmy.

"Ugh... that didn't go as planned." Johnny muttered, as he rubbed his temples. "The least those suits could've told me was that they'd gotten stronger while I was out of it..."

"Maybe I should have warned you about that," Callous muttered. She had her back turned to him, and she was relaxed now...

...but she was still thinking about having seen Goddess.

"Well, no sense in crying over spilled milk." Johnny shrugged. "I'll just get them later." Then, he glanced at Callous. "...say, why did

you decide to leave, all of a sudden?"

Callous was quiet, and then she shrugged. "...I was bored with them," she said. "I decided I didn't want to waste my time anymore."

"...right." Johnny muttered, before he looked away, glancing at his own hand. "...say, this Corruption stuff... apart from enhancing my body, what else can I do with it?"

"If you're good enough, you can learn how to manipulate others with it," Callous said.

"Manipulate others?" Johnny inquired. "Like... I can get people to commit suicide, without being near them?"

"Yes, that's possible," Callous chuckled; a suggestion like that amused her, which thankfully improved her mood.

"It is?" Johnny said, as he couldn't help but laugh. "But... what about having said incoming suicide victim commit mass murder first? Would that work, or would it just be too complex?"

"I'll admit, it's complex," Callous said. "It just depends. 1. If this said person is capable of a feat, and 2. if you're strong enough to coordinate the Corruption that way, but other than that, it's still possible."

"Well, I ought to start practicing soon." Johnny chuckled, as he turned to face Callous. "Any other ways I can use it, though? Like, I don't know, manipulating it in physical form, or something?"

"Of course." Callous promptly opened her palm and balls of dark smog appeared. Then she proceeded to juggle them. "You just have to concentrate."

"Concentrate, huh..." Nodding, Johnny opened his own palm, before looking at it, focusing intently. "...hrm..." As he looked at his palm, dark ooze began forming in his palm, before suddenly, a small tentacle erupted from his palm. Whistling, Johnny smirked at this sight. "Neat."

Callous shared the same smirk. "It even gets really fun to play with,"

she chuckled, "because it can create illusions, and shape-shift real objects into false realities."

"Is that right?" Johnny chuckled, as the tentacle retracted back into his palm. "I guess I got a lot to learn... good thing I got a smoking hot teacher standing right in front of me."

"Oh, you sweet talker," She giggled. She had to admit that she liked it though.

"No, I'm being serious." Johnny said with a smirk, before he glanced upwards. "...but that monkey guy, back there... who was he?"

"He was someone I wanted to use," she said, "but he's Metal Sonic's little pet, and Metal Sonic's been fixing him up to a point where he can resist me."

"Metal Sonic, huh?" Johnny muttered, as he folded his arms. "I overheard some people at GUN planning to retake Westopolis, since the hunk of scrap apparently hasn't done anything worth their time yet." Then, he raised an eyebrow. "But how'd someone like you get involved with someone like Metal Sonic, anyway?"

"It's a long story," Callous said. "We were working together, and he broke it off because I was too much trouble for him. That's the nutshell of it anyway."

"Eh, he probably didn't appreciate what you did for him." Johnny shrugged, as he folded his arms. "But from what I hear, you seem to have some history with mechanic people, like Metal Sonic and the chimp. Is there anyone else like that you've worked with that I should know about?"

"Nobody other than my Daddy," she said. "But I didn't like working for him. I never had much freedom to do what I wanted..."

"Then why bother trying to wake him up?" Johnny asked. "I mean, Bloom, Gloom and Ri- Slashers seemed to be ready to free him, from what I gathered."

"Well, its sounds kinda stupid and ridiculous," Callous said, "but I'm just getting him out so he can take Jill's life without mine being

affected. You see, Jill and I are connected because we share a soul. If one of us were to die, so would the other. Daddy's the one that arranged it that way, and he's the only one that can alter it to suit my demands." And a smirk grew again. "Then I'll just get rid of him when he does that."

"And how do you plan on doing that, after you've gotten him to meddle with that soul-thing?" Johnny inquired. "If he had the power to revive Bloom and Gloom, don't you think he'd be strong enough to wipe the floor with both you and Jill at once?"

"Yeah," Callous agreed, "although both his and my concerns are to get rid of her first."

"...really." Johnny nodded, as he rubbed his chin. "But I take it that you have some form of plan, to deal with him once she's dead?"

"Just simply taking him down," Callous said. "I know his weaknesses, and while the battle will be long, it can be done." Then she reached over and tickled Johnny's chin. "Although if you'd like to help..."

At that motion, Johnny smirked. "How could I turn down a lady in need?" he said, before nodding. "Sure, I'll help you take him down, when the time comes."

Callous chuckled, "Excellent..."

"So... what now?" Johnny began, as he leaned closer to Callous. "It'll probably take the butterflies a while to finish up their objective, so until then..."

"Until then, we have a little free time," Callous said, leaning closer to Johnny as well with a sexy smirk.

"And I think I know just what to spend that free time on..." Johnny chuckled, before he made his move; landing a deep, lustful kiss on Callous' lips.

Callous took it in pleasurably, kissing back in the same intensity. As he kissed her, Johnny moved his arm around her back, dragging Callous closer to him, as the kiss only intensified. Callous liked his

spirit, and it evolved into french kissing while she played with his hair. While she did that, Johnny moved his hand underneath Callous' clothing, stroking her back, not letting up for one second with the kiss. Callous liked it even more, and she wrapped her leg around his while the make-out proceeded. Soon, Johnny moved his other hand underneath Callous' clothes as well, but while he still stroked her back, he also began fondling her breasts, without breaking away. Callous quivered in utter delight, and since Johnny was so forward, she began to strip her clothes. Even while consumed in the make-out, Johnny was quick to assist Callous in removing her clothing.

Callous was really taking a liking to Johnny.

Chapter 39

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"For some reason, I want to gag," Jill uttered, feeling somewhat sickly.

"Well, we can't have that," Metal muttered, as he was sitting on the ground, eyes closed. *"If we're going to train, you shouldn't be sick, or anything of the sort."* Then, he glanced at Jill. *"So, since we were interrupted..."*

"Kekekekeke, I told you that I was sorry!" Ripper called, as he was sitting by the spring, watching the two.

"...I was wondering if we should move up a notch from just a circle of fire surrounding you," Metal proposed, as he stood up. *"Like, say, both combatants surrounded by flames?"*

"Hm," By now, Jill was beginning to ease on the idea of fire, and that was already a good sign. Still, she knew that if enough fire was used, she might not be so comfortable, but the goal was to get rid of that. "We can give it a try," she said.

"Good. Now, just give me a moment..." Metal muttered, as he looked at the grass around them. Then, with one hand, he fired a stream of oil, which surrounded both Jill and Metal. After that, he threw a small fireball at the oil with his other hand, igniting it, and surrounding the two in a circle of flames. *"Now, the point of this isn't just to withstand the heat of the flames..."* he began, before his arms turned into blades. *"...but also to withstand the* heat of battle *. Now, come at me."*

The idea sounded familiar to her, as if Jill was experiencing deja-vu, and it wasn't anything Metal had done...so right when the flames ignited, Jill almost had a flashback to another memory similar to this. It made it all the more intense as Jill took up her sword and quickly

tried to slash at Metal.

As she slashed at the Metallix, he raised one arm to block the strike, before pushing Jill away from him. Then, he rushed at her, slashing at her with both of his blades.

Jill jumped away from both blades.

The flashback hit her again. She remembered being terrified of the fire, and she remembered that dark figure towering over her.

Deity Novagod.

In a flash of rage, Jill lunged at Metal with incredible strength, as he survival instincts suddenly kicked in.

However, instead of blocking it, Metal stepped away from the lunge, before quickly swinging the blunt edges of his blades at Jill, before she could recover her balance from the lunge.

She managed to hold her sword up to block both swords, and even more surprising was that she managed to push Metal away. Then once she regained balance, she did a vertical slice toward him.

Crossing his blades, Metal blocked the strike from getting to him. As he held Jill's blade like that, he aimed a kick at her.

Though she couldn't stop the kick, it hardly did anything but put distance between them. Like Metal, she would have to do more that swing her sword. She motioned for Metal to come at her with her hand.

...she's handling this better than I expected . Metal thought, as he ran right at Jill, slashing both of his blades right at Jill.

Jill deflected the sword slashes, and she faked a sword swing in order to deliver an uppercut kick to Metal's chin.

Having expected a sword swing, Metal failed to evade the kick, which caused him to stagger back. Shaking his head, he shot back at Jill again, this time not only slashing at Jill with the left blade, but also stabbing his right blade at her.

Jill blocked the left swing and side-stepped the right stab. She didn't realize that she started going too far, because she threw a punch coated in Purity energy at Metal when he was too close.

The punch connected with the Metallix, and surprisingly enough, it had enough force to send Metal flying away from Jill, as he landed smack dab in the fire. And as Jill would shockingly realize, before he landed in the fire, he had cried out in what could only be described as pain.

Jill gasped when she saw what she did. "Metal?" she cried, running toward the fire.

As she ran towards the fire, she'd see the Metallix slowly get in a sitting position, holding his head whilst groaning. *"...good punch."* he muttered, as he stood up, the flames surrounding him giving off a creepy feel. *"...you're not done yet, are you?"* he said, as he pointed one blade at Jill.

Jill didn't care for how creepy it looked; but she realized that she had been worried over his welfare. How that happened, she wasn't sure, but she stepped away from the fire cautiously with her blade in hand. "No, I'm not done," she said. "Go ahead and come."

"If you insist," Metal nodded, before he leaped right at Jill, letting some part of the flames fly after him, reminiscent of wings in a way. In any case, Metal was quick to slash his blades at Jill.

It was enough not only to knock Jill's blade right out of her hands, but it knocked Jill onto her backside with an "OOF!"

Seeing that, Metal resisted the temptation to scoff, as he suddenly pointed his right blade directly in Jill's face. *"...you're showing progress,"* he noted, without moving his blade. *"We have a ways to go, when it comes to technique, though..."* Then, he reverted his blades back into arms. *"And please, don't trip like that during your fight with Callous; she'd take advantage of that at once."*

Jill looked away shamefully. "I understand," she muttered.

"Good," Metal nodded, before he quickly shot a stream of liquid

metal at the flames, extinguishing them. *"Take a break; you look like you could use one."*

Jill took this opportunity to grab the water canteen from her satchel and rehydrate herself with a few sips, wiping the sweat from her brow.

"...say, that feeling you had..." Metal mused, as he glanced at Jill. *"You know, the one where you felt like gagging... what do you think caused that?"*

"I don't have a sure idea," she said, "but part of me feels like it's Callous." Her stomach did another flip and she groaned, "Ugh, there it is again."

"Hrm..." Metal grumbled, as he gave out a sigh. *"Well, it'll probably pass as the time goes by. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to make a call."* Then, he walked away from Jill. *Alright, Calculate, how did it go?* he transmitted to his subordinate, so Jill couldn't hear him.

Fairly well, Cal responded. *A number of things occurred though, and Johnny finally just left with Callous.*

Did he, now... Metal responded, as he glanced at Jill from the corner of his eye. *...well, I guess that means that she's given up on you.* he added, as he looked away. *But it's only a guess, so whatever you do, make sure to stay away from her.*

You don't have to tell me twice, Cal replied. *But she says that there's Corruption in my system now...should I do something about that?*

...for the moment, just be cautious. Metal responded. *I don't know what it could do, but just stay calm, and stick to your objective. In about* five days *, this will all start to calm down.*

Alright, Cal transmitted. *...aside from that, I learned something strange. Apparently Anistasia has the ability to turn into a large, beast, and she was fighting BOTH Johnny and Callous without trouble...*

Anistasia? Metal hummed. *You mean the little husky with telekinetic powers, right?* Hearing that, he scratched his chin. *That* is *news... any idea how she was able to do that?*

The story is confusing to me, but the only thing I knew was that she was under the protection of a woman named Goddess, who delivered her birth long ago, Cal replied. *Also, Hunter said that this Goddess is Jill's mother...can you believe that?*

...it's surprising, I'll give it that. Metal shrugged; he already knew about Goddess, but not that she had helped Ani. *Just stay in touch, in case you spot Callous and Johnny attempting anything reckless. Sound good, Calculate?*

Affirmative, Cal replied. *Is that all, Metal?*

...for now. Metal nodded. *Dismissed.* Then, he cut off the transmission line, as he looked back at Jill. *"So, how are we feeling?"*

"Besides nausea, I'm good," Jill said with a thumbs-up; though there was sarcasm in her voice.

"Good, good..." Metal said with a nod, as he approached Jill, before sitting down next to her. *"...listen. I may be crossing some form of line here..."* he began, as he glanced at Jill. *"...but if you're gonna beat Callous, I think I need to know more about Callous, and maybe Novagod as well. You've given me the basics... so would you go in further detail?"*

"What do you want to know?" Jill asked.

"The works," Metal said. *"* Abilities *, efficency in combat, personalities, you name it. I need to know everything you know about the two; that way, we can better prepare you during the training."*

"Who do you want to start with? Deity, or Callous?" Jill asked again.

"Callous, first." Metal nodded. *"We can ease our way into Novagod afterwards."*

"Alright," Jill said, taking a deep breath since it would take awhile. "We already established that Callous is pretty much my polar opposite in terms of personality and abilities. She's wanted to kill me ever since Deity created her, but there's a problem. Because Deity had ripped my soul in half to create her, we share that soul. Anything that happens to one of us, the other feels...which is probably why I feel sick right now, and if I'm feeling that way, I don't want to know what Callous is doing."

"Anyway, I digress. Since both of us are affected if something should happen to one of us, that includes death. She can't kill me, otherwise she would no longer exist...and sadly, the same goes for me. Only Callous has the power to give up the part of the soul she was created from, but that won't be anytime soon."

"Not necessarily." Metal said, as he looked at Jill. *"Remember that wager she made with me? She said that if you won, you'd have the right to claim that part of her soul. And am I not a machine of my word? But do go on."*

"Yeah, I didn't forget the bet, but other than that, she never would've wanted to do it," Jill said. "Anyhow, Deity originally created her with the ability to...manipulate me." Jill looked away from Metal. "She couldn't directly control me, but she has an influence over my emotions and my thoughts, and it ultimately controlled how I acted. I wasn't able to fight her at all..."

"But nowadays, she can't do that." Jill finally looked back at Metal. "She says there's something interfering with our connection, protecting me from her control."

"...somehow, I have a feeling on what causes that." Metal mused, before nodding. *"Anything else?"*

"If you think it's my mother, I don't think that's it," Jill said. "I never encountered her face to face, so it's can't be her." She thought back when Sage entered her mind.

To when she saw Sonic and his friends.

They told her that they were the reason her powers returned, and while she didn't fully understand it, she felt like they were the ones protecting her.

But that wasn't part of the conversation, so Jill set the thought aside. "Anyway, I think that's all for Callous, unless there might be something else I'm missing that I'm forgetting," she said.

"I see..." Metal muttered, before he closed his eyes. *"...what about Novagod, then?"*

"I'm sure Callous may have told you a little about him," Jill said, "so why don't you tell me what you know about him, and I'll fill in the blanks?"

"Okay, let's see..." Metal muttered, as he rubbed his head. *"...Novagod is a vampire, who feeds on* Chaos Energy *, rather than blood. Somehow, the Chaos Energy he consumes is converted into* Corruption *... then he met you, and from there, he created Callous, and you eventually sealed him within that black emerald."* Then he gave Jill a nod. *"That's what I got."*

"Okay," Jill muttered. "Deity manipulates as well, but he has a more direct way of doing it. As well as being able to consume Chaos Energy, he can feed on someone's life energy. Once he does that, they're vulnerable to his control and become mindless slaves to him. It's very difficult to stop him, especially if he brainwashes a powerful warrior. I don't know if that's why he pursued me, but he relentlessly made my life miserable."

"...kind of what I'm supposed to be doing." Metal muttered, as he looked away from Jill. *"...go on."*

"He also has knowledge..." Jill said, thinking far back to her own memories. "...he knew about Purity and Corruption, and I have the feeling he knows more about it than I do. He has a lot of secrets."

"Cryptic person, I take it." Metal muttered. *"I tend to run into people like that often, these days..."*

"Anyhow...I don't even know how I sealed him away within that black

emerald," Jill said. "I just...did. I mean, it just happened...I've been trying to figure out just how I got my powers in the first place, and part of me feels like Deity knows that...so when the time comes that he breaks out, I want him to answer my questions, because there's really no one else I can ask that will give me a straight answer."

"Do you think he'll bother answering you, if he's just going to try and kill you?" Metal inquired. *"That seems like an important thing to think about."*

"Good point," Jill admitted sheepishly, "but it was wishful thinking…"

"...if it'll make you feel better, I could try asking him for you." Metal said with a shrug. *"I mean, it's not like he has anything against me, so he'll be more likely to grant me an audience, at least when compared to you."*

"I don't know if it'll make a difference," Jill said, "but thanks for the offer."

Again, she started to think about Sonic and his friends. Jill was beginning to wonder if maybe she should tell Metal that they visit her in her mind.

"...is something the matter, Jill?" Metal inquired, as he glanced at her. *"Something about Callous or Novagod you recalled?"*

"No," she said, taking another deep breath and then looking Metal straight in the eye. "It's about Sonic."

That made Metal's eyes widen, as he tilted his head. *"...just what is it, about him?"* he uttered.

"It's something that's been going on before I met you," Jill said, closing her eyes. "...but I see him and his friends in my dreams."

"...you do?" Hearing that, Metal approached Jill, looking her sharply in the eye. *"Do they... say anything?"*

"They encourage me not to give up hope," she said, "but most recently, I was asked to find Angel Island, because they told me that

some of the answers to my questions would be there...that's why I was surprised when you told me you hid the black emerald on the island, but I get the feeling it was more than the black emerald."

"...really?" Metal muttered, as he sat down, still looking at Jill. *"...somehow, I get the feeling that if you're to face off against Novagod for the last time, it'll be on that island."* he mused.

"...the Professor told me that something happened to the Master Emerald after Knuckles died, and now there's that storm around the island," Jill said. "I don't remember if I asked you before, but do you know what exactly happened to the island, Metal?"

"...I can't say for sure." Metal shrugged. *"All I know is that there is something wrong with the* Master Emerald *, causing a never-ending storm to surround the entire island."* Then, he closed his eyes. *"It's to the point that even spirits are weakened by it."*

"Spirits..." that brought up a few more questions, but it gave Jill a lead. Could it be possible that Sonic and his friends need to get into the island and they can't because of the Master Emerald? That, somehow, Jill can help them do that?

"Is there something else on your mind, Jill?" Metal inquired, as he looked at the ewe.

Jill hadn't heard him at first, because she was still lost in thought. The thoughts began wandering from Sonic and his friends, to the earlier thoughts about Metal's meaning in life...who knows why it went there, but it did.

"...hey." Metal repeated, as he snapped his fingers. *"Is there something else on your mind? Pay attention."*

Jill warped back to reality with a jolt. A question came up in her mind that exited her mouth before she knew it, "Metal, why are you so intent on killing me, that you make me promise my life in your hands?"

Hearing that question, Metal looked away from Jill. *"...I..."* he began, as he closed his eyes. *"...gods, I feel like an idiot..."* he muttered, before he looked back at Jill. *"...because you're the only one capable of stopping me from conquering the world."*

"...but why conquer the world?" Jill asked honestly.

"...because there's really nothing else left for me, I suppose," Metal shrugged. *"I was programmed to be nothing more than a servant to Eggman... and when he was gone, along with the one I was supposed to kill..."* Then, he looked at Jill. *"What would you do, if every purpose you had been outfitted with was lost to the* tooth of time *?"*

"Personally...well, I wouldn't give up," Jill said. "Life is full of many meaningful things and there are some people in the world that give up too easily before they find it." She looked Metal square in the eye again. "I...I want to..." she couldn't let it out.

"...you want to what?" Metal uttered, as he folded his arms. *"If you have something you want to say, say it."*

"...I want to help you find a better purpose than to kill and conquer," she finally said. Then she turned away hurriedly. "It probably sounds silly and stupid to you, huh?"

"...a bit, yes." Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. *"Not that I don't... appreciate the thought, I guess, but... you do realize what you're dealing with here, right?"* Then, he looked away from Jill. *"It's not like I'm a Mobian, you know. How do you expect to find a purpose for a machine?* "

"There's always a way..." Jill said, looking back at Metal. "I know you're worth more that what Eggman saw in you."

"...hmph." Metal scoffed, as he glanced at Jill. *"And what sort of purpose do you think I could possibly have?"* he said. *"Go on, entertain me."*

Jill was about to open her mouth, but she realized that she was at a loss for words.

"I thought so." Metal scoffed, before he looked away from Jill. *"Sorry to burst your bubble, there..."*

"Even then, I still want to help you, Metal," Jill said. "I still believe...there's a better purpose for you."

"...don't get your hopes up; that's all I'll say to that..." Metal muttered, as he turned away from Jill, just as he noticed Ripper, who was still sitting by the spring, but apparently, he had been watching the two all this time. *"...don't you need sleep, or something?"*

"Kekekekeke... nope," Ripper said with a shake of his head. "I just got... interested... when you were talking about that guy... Novagod? Kekekekeke..."

Jill grew a little glum, but then her attention was averted to the sky. She just now noticed that it was basked in an orange, sunset glow, and was starting to become the evening. "It's getting late," she said.

"Hmm..." Metal hummed, as he looked at the sky as well. *"...I suppose a few more hours of training before bed-time wouldn't hurt,"* he muttered, before he stood up. *"So, Jill..."* Then, his right arm turned into a blade. *"...ready?"*

"...sure," Jill said, bringing her sword forth by a bright glow.

"It's getting late..." Proxy muttered, as he looked out a window back at the Clubhouse, looking at the sky.

"Is it?" Tails Doll mused, as he was sitting on Proxy's shoulder. *"Boy, wonder how Big Bro is doing."*

"And I suppose that if you knew, you wouldn't tell us?" Proxy guessed, as the doll only nodded in response. With a sigh, the android looked away from the window.

"Alright! It's done!" Brick exclaimed as he walked into the room where everyone was. In his arms he carried a slick looking Extreme Gear with blue tail fins.

"Whoa!" Striker uttered, staring at the Extreme Gear in awe. "Did

you make this Brick?"

"Me and the Professor finished it," Brick said. "This one I've been working on for awhile actually, but now that the Professor helped me, I might be able to make more so you guys can learn how to ride Extreme Gear!"

"WOW! Seriously?" Jack uttered in complete awe, as he looked at the Extreme Gear. "Woah... it's so cool!"

"'t looks nice, that`s fer sure..." Whisker noted, as he observed the Extreme Gear. "...so, I bet that 't packs quite a punch, right?"

"I think it does." Natal guessed, as she couldn't help but have a smile on her face as she looked at it.

Proxy glanced at it with a small smirk, before looking back out the window.

"So...who wants to test it out?" Brick asked.

"Oo-oo-oo, I do!" Striker said, hopping with a raised hand.

"No, I wanna try it out!" Rudy protested.

"Me, me, can I try, pleeeeeease?" Jack chimed in.

"...think I could try?" Natal said, as she raised her hand, trying to get Brick's attention over the kids.

Brick laughed at all their enthusiasm. "Alright, guess what? You all can try it out, but only if you take turns."

"Awesome!" Jack laughed, as he looked at the other kids. "Okay, how's the line-up going to be?"

"What about the youngest first?" Natal suggested. "Then we go in order, depending on how old we all are."

"Rudy's nine and I'm ten," Striker said. "So I think that means that he gets to go first, and then me, and then Jack, and then Natal."

"Sweet!" Rudy exclaimed triumphantly.

"Alright, since we've got it set up," Brick said. "Lets head outside."

"Okay!" Striker said, following Brick outside as well as Rudy. "Jack, Natal, come on!"

"Coming!" Jack laughed, as he and Natal followed Striker, Rudy and Brick outside.

"I`ve got t' be seein' how this will go..." Whisker said with a nod, as he began following the others, when he noticed that Proxy remained where he stood. "Ahoy, Proxy, aren`t ye gonna come ou', too?"

"...I'll pass." Proxy said with a wave, as he glanced out the window. "Go on, Whisker; don't mind me."

"...if ye say so..." Whisker muttered, before he followed the others.

"Why aren't you going out, Proxy?" Tails Doll inquired, once Whisker was out of earshot.

"...I've been thinking a bit..." Proxy muttered, as he glanced at Tails Doll. "About Jill."

"I'm thinking of Jill too," Milo came up, and surprisingly enough, he wasn't afraid of Tails Doll this time; maybe because he knew that he rid them of the 'bad butterflies' that Tails Doll told them about; the source of the bad vibes Milo was getting earlier. "I'm not a big fan of Extreme Gear, so I'm not going out there with them."

"Oh..." Tails Doll mused, as he looked from Proxy to Milo. *"...so, we can play inside?"*

"Actually, I don't think I'll have time to play..." Then, Proxy glanced at Tails Doll. "You can go ahead and go outside; don't wait for us."

"...okay." Tails Doll nodded, before he fluttered after the others, leaving Proxy and Milo on their own.

"...feeling better, now?" Proxy said, as he glanced at Milo.

"Yeah, a little," Milo admitted, twiddling his thumbs.

"Good." Proxy said, as he glanced out of the window again. "...Milo, the fact that Tails Doll shows up, scares away a pair of butterflies, and says that Metal Sonic wanted him to do that... doesn't it seem a bit suspicious to you?"

"Yes it does," Milo said. "It makes me wonder not only why Tails Doll did it, but why Metal sent him to do it. It's like he decided he's going to protect us instead of try to hurt us."

"Yeah... and frankly, I don't see why Metal Sonic would do that." Proxy muttered. "If he wanted to rule the world, all he would have to do is to let Callous pick us off, and then finish her himself... plus, how could he have given Tails Doll that command..." Then, he turned to look at Milo. "...if Tails Doll was with Jill when she left?"

Milo suddenly gasped. "Proxy, does that mean Metal got to Jill?"

"I don't know," Proxy shook his head, as he folded his arms. "But it has gotten me worried... I need to see if I can't find any trace of either Metal or Jill." Then, he crouched down, so he and Milo could see eye-to-eye. "So... if you'd tell the others that I'll be gone for a while..."

"Okay," Milo said, nodding. "I remember that Sage gave Jill a Chaos Emerald, so it shouldn't be hard trying to find her if you use our Chaos Emerald."

"...alright." Proxy nodded, as he rubbed Milo's head. "I won't be gone for long." Then, he stood up, before taking out the Chaos Emerald. "See you soon." he added, before warping away, leaving Milo on his own.

"Alright," Milo told himself. "Now to go tell the others."

"Metal, what about Ripper?" Jill asked, once the training for the day was done. "Is he going to continue to remain with us, or go back to the HQ to his friends?"

"...that's for him to decide, I guess." Metal shrugged, as he glanced at the mantis, who had fallen asleep. *"But if he decides to join his*

friends at the HQ, then he'll have to walk. There's just no way that I'll be taking him back there; it'd tarnish my reputation."

"In the morning, I'll tell him he can go to his friends then," Jill said. "I'll make sure that he keeps a secret about yo-" Jill flinched. She had sensed something, and she knew it was a spontaneous charge of Chaos Energy.

Someone had warped, and close to them too.

Metal had felt it too, as he looked around. *"...who is that?"* he muttered, as he quickly glanced at Jill. *"Hide."*

Jill jumped to her feet and grabbed her satchel, hiding behind some brush out of sight.

Standing up, Metal looked around, as he slowly morphed his left arm into a blade. *"...come out, wherever you are."*

"Fine." At that point, someone suddenly appeared right behind the Metallix, and only with a swift movement from Metal, did he block a kick aimed at his head. "Metal Sonic..." Proxy growled, as he landed on the ground, glaring at the Metallix.

"...oh, the android who got away." Metal scoffed, as he glanced at the area where Jill had hidden, subtly motioning for her to stay put. However, just so Proxy wouldn't get suspicious, Metal also looked around the area as well. *"You're the only one here?"*

Proxy? How did he get here? Jill thought.

"Yeah, it's only me." Proxy nodded, as he cracked his knuckles. "Now, tell me what's going on. Where is Jill?"

"Jill?" Metal replied in a surprised tone. *"I haven't seen her in a while."*

"Bull." Proxy responded, as he grabbed hold of Metal's shoulders. "Tails Doll was with Jill when she left for training, and recently, Tails Doll appeared by the clubhouse, with orders from you." Then, he let go of the Metallix. "I traced the signal from a Chaos Emerald Jill held, and it led me here. Now where is she?"

"She had an emerald?" Metal uttered, just as his chassis opened. Then, he took out a green Chaos Emerald, showing it to the android. *"Is this the signal you were looking for?"*

Jill quickly glanced at the satchel she had. *Oh no! I've got the emerald in my bag!* she thought frantically.

Looking at the green Chaos Emerald, Proxy glared at Metal. "Then why am I sensing another emerald in the area?"

"You are?" Metal mused, before he chuckled. *"Oh, probably just Calculate. He must be close-by, with a new emerald for me."* Then, the Metallix grabbed hold of Proxy's shoulder, glaring at the android. *"Now, why don't you go do me a favor..."*

"Favor? Why would I do that?" Proxy spat, as he brushed Metal's hand away from him.

"Easy; because if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't be half as powerful as Shadow." Metal said, as he folded his arms. *"I upgraded you, so technically, you owe me your very life."*

No you don't, Proxy, Jill thought. *Not really.* She shuddered, realizing that Metal had no idea the real Shadow was present in that android.

Growling, Proxy folded his arms. "Just what kind of favor are we talking about, anyway?"

"Just a simple delivery job," Metal noted, as he pointed behind Proxy, right at the sleeping Ripper. *"Could you take him to the Chaotix HQ?"*

"Ripper..." Proxy muttered, before he looked at Metal. "What's he doing here?"

"Oh, you just love asking questions, don't you?" Metal groaned, before he suddenly grabbed Proxy's throat, holding the android in a mighty grip. *"Just shut up, and pay attention."*

Jill couldn't bear seeing Metal do that, but she kept silent, because

an idea came up in her head. *Shadow, I don't know if you can hear me,* she spoke in her mind, *but I need you to get Proxy to trust Metal...*

I don't think I need to. Shadow instantly replied in her head. *Metal seems to be doing that on his own.*

After a short while of silence between the two machines, Metal let go of Proxy, as the android looked at Metal with a stunned look. "...are you serious?"

"Absolutely," Metal said with a nod. *"But you cannot let anyone else know about it. Got that?"*

"...you honestly surprise me, Metal." Proxy muttered, as he glanced at Ripper. "You need me to take Ripper back to the HQ, right?"

"If you would do that, I'd be delighted," Metal said, before he waved his hands at the android. *"Now, shoo."*

"...fine." With a nod, Proxy walked over to the mantis, holding out his own emerald. Then, as he placed his hand on Ripper, both of them warped away.

Jill waited a minute, and then, "...is it safe now?" she asked.

"Yep," Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. *"You can come out now."*

Emerging out of the bush, Jill brushed herself off as she approached Metal. "What did you do?" she asked. "You guys were silent, and Proxy was suddenly surprised and more willing to listen to you."

"...I... told him," Metal replied, as he looked away from Jill. *"I told him that I was getting you ready for your battle with Callous, and that I sent Tails Doll and Calculate to assist your friends... but he won't tell anyone else about it."*

"...oh," Jill muttered.

For awhile, there was another silence.

Then Jill began to gather up some leaves in a pile.

Seeing that, Metal glanced at Jill with a baffled look. *"...what are you doing?"* he asked.

"Making a bed," she replied without looking at him. "This is the way I slept after I was banished from my village and I was all alone." Then once she had gathered a big enough pile, she pulled off her jacket and used it as a blanket as she lied down on the pile. Then she let out a deep sigh of content.

"...really," Metal muttered, as he sat down next to Jill, looking at her. *"Well... good night , I suppose."*

"Good night Metal," Jill replied softly, closing her eyes.

As she closed her eyes, Metal looked up at the sky. *...Sonic... I just know that somewhere, you're laughing at me.* he thought, as he looked back down at Jill. *...I suppose I would have laughed as well... if I could.*

Soon enough, Jill feel into a peaceful slumber.

Looking down at Jill, Metal tilted his head, as his right arm slowly morphed into a blade, which he raised, whilst looking down at Jill. *...it's the perfect opportunity... two flies in one smack...* he thought, as he kept the blade raised, not moving his eyes away from Jill.

Then, however, the blade reverted into his arm, and he lowered it. *...no. I can't be satisfied that way... besides...* As he thought that, he looked at both of his hands, the left one briefly giving out a green glow, and the right one briefly giving out a dark glow. *...I'll need more data...*

Chapter 40

CHAPTER FOURTY

At the HQ, Wiper was sitting in the living room, silently looking out of the window. *Callous and Johnny... that's some combination...* he thought.

"Wiper, what happened today?" Boomer asked, as she passed by. "The Captain tried to tell me, but he doesn't know much of what's going on either. I was hoping you had a better idea."

"...you saw that lion, right?" Wiper began, without looking at Boomer. "His name is Johnny... and frankly, he's as evil as they come. He died fifteen years ago, but GUN somehow resurrected him, and sent him to kill the escaped agents." Then, he glanced at Boomer. "But he hadn't grown any stronger during the years... until Callous got her hands on him."

"Yeah, I saw that," Boomer grumbled. "...but who was that woman that descended from the roof and reverted Ani back to normal sleep? The Captain sort of neglected to tell me that."

"...her name is Goddess." Wiper said, as he looked away from Boomer again. "...and she's Jill's mother."

"Jill's mother?" Boomer questioned. "Just how..." Then she shook her head. "Ah, never mind. Too many confusing things are happening, and I think that they're better left unquestioned."

Then she glanced out the same window Wiper was looking out. "Now that Johnny's with Callous, what does that mean?"

"...we have a lot of trouble on our hands." Wiper replied. "Callous is already a force to be reckoned with, and Johnny's been powered up by her and GUN. If the only one who can stand against both of them is Ani in her werewolf-form..." Then, he closed his eyes. "...sorry. I'd rather not want to think about that too much."

"Yeah, you're right," Boomer admitted. Then she decided to change the subject, "Gee, I hope Jill's alright training on her own, especially with all the crap going on."

"Yeah..." Wiper muttered. "...she's been able to handle severe situations before..." he added, as he thought back to Jill's confrontation with Miser, along with the swarm of androids she, along with Wiper and King had fought off. "So I think she'll be fine."

Hunter suddenly rushed right up to the two of them. "Wiper! Proxy's here, and he's got Ripper!"

"What?" That got Wiper right out of his seat, as he looked at Hunter in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Positive!" At that point, Sage rushed in after Hunter. "I managed to catch their brainwaves; they're definitely here!"

That was all it took for Wiper to suddenly rush past Hunter and Sage, headed towards the entrance. Hunter immediately followed after Wiper, and Boomer did too, but she stopped in her tracks when her wound cramped up.

"Ah, take it easy, now." Sage said, as she glanced at Boomer, lifting the duck off the ground. "You don't want to risk the wound opening, now do you?" Then, she followed Wiper and Hunter, carrying Boomer after her.

Standing in the entrance doorway was Proxy, who was carrying a sleeping Ripper in his arms, something that King, Queen and Miser already was there to see. "Sorry for dropping in unannounced... but I think he's supposed to stay here?" the android said with a smile.

"...N-Noon..." King uttered, as he slowly approached Proxy. "It's... it's really him..."

"Proxy, did you save him?" Hunter questioned in his utter disbelief.

"Actually, I just happened to come across him." he said, as he handed Ripper to King, who could only look at the mantis in disbelief. "And he seems to be alright."

"Hm?" Queen, however, quickly noticed something off about one of Ripper's hands; namely, a trail of burnt skin around the wrist. "...did something happen to his hand?"

"I wouldn't know; he was like that when I found him." Proxy said with a brief shrug.

"But... he's safe!" Miser said in a happy tone, as she looked at the sleeping mantis as well. "It's good to see him back... and he seems to be at peace, as well."

"That's a relief..." Hunter sighed. "But even then...how did he escape Callous and her control?"

"We can probably ask him when he wakes up," Boomer said.

"For now, we should find a bed for him." Queen said, as she glanced at King. "...King?"

As it turned out, King was crying, as he was looking down at the mantis. "I'm just... glad that he's back!" he said with a huge smile, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Hunter set a hand on King as he led him and Ripper down the hall. "C'mon King," he said.

"Ripper's back?" Charmy walked into the room just in time to see Hunter and King walking off.

"...he's back." Wiper muttered, as he closed his eyes, smiling.

"Well, I guess I'm done here." Proxy noted, as he turned around. "I don't want to let the guys at the clubhouse worry too much, so..." Then, he waved to those still in the room. "I'll see you around."

"See you Proxy," Charmy waved, watching as Proxy left. Then he turned to Boomer. "What's the scoop?"

"Proxy ran across Ripper," Boomer replied.

"Wasn't he under a spell of Callous'?" Charmy asked.

"Apparently he's fine now," Boomer said with a shrug. "Proxy said he doesn't know anything, and that he found him that way."

"Hm..." Charmy then smiled after thinking for a minute. "...Well, I think I know who we should thank for that."

"...I think I have a feeling as well." Wiper mused, as he watched Proxy walk off, before suddenly vanishing via Chaos Control. *Jill... thank you* . he thought.

"Well, it's getting late. We should all tuck in ourselves," Charmy said, letting out a yawn. "Boomer, do you need any help getting to bed?"

"Oh, nah, I got it," Boomer said, trudging down the hall. "And even then, I'm sure Newt will give me a hand."

"Anyone need a hand?" As if on cue, Newt rushed right down the hall upon Boomer saying that, stopping in front of Boomer. "Because I can help you out, y'know!"

Seeing that, Sage couldn't help but chuckle, and even Wiper and Queen had to smile at that sight.

Charmy tried to suppress chuckling while he saw Boomer smile at Newt. "Sure," she told him.

"Great!" Newt said, as he led Boomer down the hall, making sure that she wouldn't be in any pain. "Just hang on; we'll be there soon, y'know!"

"Well, it is getting late..." Sage mused, as she glanced out the window. "I think it's time we caught us some shuteye."

"Yep," Charmy agreed, walking off to his own room.

"No scary movie tonight guys, sorry," Brick said.

"Aw, c'mon Brick!" Striker pestered. "It's a special occasion! Rudy's here after all, and he needs to see a scary movie!"

"Yeah, if I won't die of fright, then I'll die of boredom!" added Rudy.

"Come on, just one movie, Brick, please?" Jack pleaded, as he was actually looking at Brick with puppy-eyes.

"Come on, pleeeeeeeease?" Tails Doll chimed in, as he looked at Brick as well, only... well, not with puppy-eyes, seeing as his eyes were painted on.

"Sorry, but it's been a long day, and you guys need some sleep." Natal said, as she had her arms folded. "You can watch a scary movie tomorrow, but tonight, nothing like that."

"Yeah, it's just too close to bedtime for you guys," Brick agreed with Natal.

"Aw," the children groaned, except Milo who was looking out the window.

"Go on to bed guys," Brick motioned. "I'm sure Natal might read you a story if she's feeling up to it."

"Really?" Rudy asked, looking at Natal.

That seemed to put Natal on the spot, as most of the kids glanced at her. "Um... y-yeah, sure thing." she said, as she gave the kids a nod. "You just pick a story, and I'll read it for you."

"Cool," Striker said, smiling. He took her by the hand as the kids led her down the hall, leaving Brick with Milo.

"Something wrong Milo?" Brick asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just waiting for Proxy to come back."

"Oh, okay," Brick said. Then he sat down next to the little lion. "Well then, I'll wait with you."

"Thanks," Milo said, smiling at Brick.

"No problem bud," Brick replied, ruffling his head.

At that point, something suddenly warped into view next to Brick and Milo; namely Proxy. "Phew... it's done."

"What? What's done?" Brick asked, but before Proxy could answer, Milo clung to him.

"Proxy, did you find out if Jill was okay?" he asked.

"...what?" Brick was stunned. Milo never told him why Proxy left; he just said Proxy had an errand to do.

"She's fine." Proxy said with a smile, as he rubbed Milo's head. "She was asleep when I found her, so I decided not to disturb her. But rest assured; she's perfectly safe." Then, he glanced at Brick. "...it's getting late. Milo, why don't you go to bed?"

"Okay," Milo said with some relief, as he went ahead and walked down the hall the others had gone. "Good night," he said.

"Good night Milo," Brick said. Then once Milo was gone, Brick stood up. "What's this about checking on Brownie?" he asked solemnly. "Did something happen?"

"I had a hunch, and needed to check it out." Proxy said, as he checked to see if Brick was the only one there, before looking back at the bull. "...listen. I need you to keep what I'm going to tell you absolutely secret. None of the others can know about it, and if possible, you need to act dumbfounded, if the event comes that the others find out about it as well."

Brick was bewildered, but he nodded in agreement to the promise. "What is it?"

"...remember when Jill said that she was going to train?" Proxy began, as he took a deep breath, before placing a hand on Brick's shoulder. "...she's not training alone. Her coach... is Metal Sonic."

Brick was speechless, as well as shocked out of his mind. "...how?" he managed to sputter. "Why?"

"Believe me, I had a hard time believing that as well." Proxy said, as he closed his eyes. "And more shockingly, Metal's doing it on his

own volition; it was his idea to start training Jill, and... he sent out not only Tails Doll here, but Cal to the HQ, to fend off some of Callous' attempts at taking us down."

"So that's why Tails Doll is here," Brick whispered. "But even then...why is he doing this on his own?"

"...he didn't give a clear answer." Proxy shrugged. "He said something about him not wanting Callous roam freely about, doing what he's supposed to be doing, but... I don't think I buy that."

"...neither do I," Brick said. "But I'm too tired to think about that...I'm going to head off to bed," Brick said, walking away.

"You do that. I'll keep watch." Proxy said, as he glanced out the window, before looking after Brick. "And remember; don't tell anyone else about it."

"I won't," Brick assured. "Good night."

"You must have had a girlfriend, because it seems like you've done this before," Callous chuckled.

"I've had one," Johnny began, as he chuckled as well, "but it didn't last. I only got together with her, because I knew that she'd be able to cancel out King's ability... then she ended up trying to kill me by electrocuting me with her; didn't work, though."

"What a shame," Callous sighed. Then she chuckled again, "I guess that means you're a free man then."

"You got that right." Johnny replied with a smirk.

Callous ran her finger playfully across his chest. "You plan on using me anytime soon?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, that all depends." Johnny said, as he glanced at Callous. "It all depends on how you would like to be used."

Callous just smirked. "I like the way you think; not only that, but I like your style..."

"I'm glad that it satisfied you, then." Johnny replied with a smirk of his own.

"But in all seriousness," Callous got up and crawled on top of Johnny, getting face-to-face with him. "What are you going to do about GUN?"

"Oh, I'll get to them." Johnny replied, as his eyes followed Callous. "First off, I just need to get rid of those renegades, for personal reasons." Then, he hummed in thought. "Then... well, having them try and keep me under control would just become tiresome, so I figure I'll bring them down as well."

"You're quite the dare-devil," Callous teased, giving him a kiss.

"Glad to hear it." Johnny replied, as he kissed Callous back.

After kissing, Callous got off Johnny. "I should check on Bloom and Gloom's progress," she said, sitting up; showing off her bare, tantalizing figure.

"Yeah, maybe so..." Johnny noted, as he sat up, looking at Callous. "How do you think they did, anyway?"

"I don't remember how reliable they are," Callous said. Once she stood up, she snapped her fingers. There was a puff of black smoke, and once it cleared, Callous was dressed up in her biker suit. "We'll just have to meet at the rendezvous point and find out."

Nodding, Johnny stood up as well, cracking his neck. "Need an escort there?" he asked.

"Sure, why not?" Callous said.

It was a little past one in the morning when Jill jolted awake in a cold sweat. At first her mind wasn't coherent and she was scared because didn't know where she was. Then her mind recapped what happened to realize she was sleeping on her bed of leaves in the woods where she was training with Metal; whom she didn't see was sitting next to her.

" *...hi.* " Metal said in a casual tone, as he glanced down at Jill. "

Feeling alright? "

Jill was startled when she saw Metal, but then she buried her face in her knees. "…I'm fine," she muttered. "I just had a nightmare is all."

" *Really?* " Metal noted, as he tilted his head. " *Was it a vague nightmare, or a detailed one?* "

"Well…" Jill wasn't sure how to answer that.

The fog was there, as usual, but she emerged from the fog only to find darkness.

"…I was spoken to by a voice," she said, looking up at Metal. "I knew whose voice it was…and it scared me."

That voice had said very unsettling things to her.

" *...well?* " Metal asked, as he looked at Jill. " *Who was it, and what did this person say?* "

"It was…" Jill hesitated, but she knew how annoyed Metal was when she did that so she forced herself to say it, "…it was Deity Novagod, and he said that there was nowhere to hide anymore."

" *...so you suppose he's getting closer to being freed?* " he mused, as he glanced up at the sky. *Goddess... I sure hope that placing him there was a good idea,* he thought.

"Probably," Jill replied, shuddering. "Next thing I knew, something was chasing me and I cried for help as I ran…but my plea went unanswered." With that, she added a thought; *not even Sonic or any of his friends answered.*

" *...and then?* " Metal uttered, as he looked down at Jill. " *Did whatever was chasing you catch up with you, making you wake up?* "

"…yeah, pretty much," Jill said, tightening her arms around her knees as she buried her face in them again.

" *Relax,* " Metal said, as he gave Jill a pat on the back. " *It was just a*

dream, right? Even if it was some kind of warning... you're under my supervision, so you should be fine. "

Somehow, Jill felt a little better when he said that. "…Metal, were you ever afraid of something?" Jill asked curiously, looking up at him.

" *...now what kind of question is that?* " Metal chuckled, as he shook his head, " *But if I* could *be afraid of something, I don't know what it would've been.* "

"…you sure you weren't afraid that Deity would kill me before you?" a very direct question it was, but Jill was still curious.

" *...yes.* " Metal muttered. " *I can say that I wasn't afraid of that happening. I just don't* want *that to happen; big difference, there.* "

"Hm," Somehow, Jill doubted that, but as she opened her mouth to speak again, something hit her nose. It felt wet, and it had come from the sky. Once she looked up, she saw the sky was covered in dark clouds, and rain was beginning to drop. "You're kidding me…" Jill groaned, once it was raining fully now.

" *...rain?* " Metal muttered, as he looked up. " *Hmph... that does put a damper on our training.* " Then, he glanced at the steel walls surrounding them. " *...I could create a roof over our heads. Maybe a few windows, here and there, to let some light in. Sound good?* "

"That sounds like—!" Jill was cut off by a loud boom echoing in the distance; which she figured was thunder.

It was at that moment that Jill realized something.

"Those walls are made from…liquid metal, right?" she questioned uneasily.

" *...yeah?* " Metal questioned, as he looked at her with a baffled look. " *...Jill, just because it has liquid in its name, doesn't mean that it's liquid in its present state.* " he said with a droll tone, before pointing at the walls. " *See? They're solid. If you're worried about the lightning, don't. It won't be a bother.* "

"But doesn't metal conduct electricity?"

On cue, a lightning bolt shot down from the sky. It didn't hit the walls, no.

It hit Metal.

" *YEEEAAAAAARRRRGHHH!* " The lightning striking the Metallix caused him to shriek in unfathomable pain, as his entire body was convulsing from this blow, his eyes wide open.

Jill backed away in terror, since she had been right next to him when it happened. "Metal?"

Soon, the lightning died out, and Metal stood perfectly still, before he suddenly keeled over, landing on his back, completely motionless. " *...kkh...* "

Jill let out a gasp, but she stood there stupefied, getting soaked in the rain as she stared at Metal.

At some point, she finally had the sense to approach Metal. "… Metal?" she uttered worriedly.

However, Metal didn't respond, as his head only slowly tilted from side to side. " *...it... hu-ur- it... hurt-hu-urts...* " he uttered, his speech pattern glitching up.

Jill grew even more afraid. Something as powerful as lightning would do a lot of damage to Metal, and when she remembered what Tails' cannon did to Metal with an EMP…

"…oh-no," she uttered in realization.

The first thing she wanted to ensure was to keep it from happening again. "We have to get you out of the rain!" she said, reaching over to pick him up.

Thankfully, Metal was far too weakened to even attempt to protest, as Jill picked him up. " *...J-Jill? Is tha-ill? I-ou, Ji-at yo-ill?* " he uttered.

Trying to pick him up at first was almost impossible, because Metal's…well, metal body was heavier than she ever imagined.

No, she thought desperately. *I have to get him out of the rain! I need strength!*

Jill, let me help you… Jill instantly recognized that voice in her head as Knuckles.

Then please, lend me your strength! I have to get him out of the rain! She pleaded in her head.

The next time she tried to pick up Metal, she miraculously was able to, and she managed to get him up on her back to carry piggy-back.

" *It fe-co- eels co-it fee-old...* " Metal sputtered, as his head tilted about like that of a rag doll.

"Don't worry Metal," Jill assured. "I'll find a warmer place out of the rain." She noticed that the walls had melted due to Metal's weakening, and without further ado, she took off as quickly as she could through the woods while carrying Metal.

She ran, and she ran, and ran.

She was growing even more frantic the farther she got when she still didn't find a good place out of the rain, and Metal was growing worse. Soon, he might shut down.

"Metal, please don't shut down!" she said, as she kept running.

" *...elp...* " he uttered, as he weakly and slowly placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. " *...urry... elp... me...* "

"I'm trying," Jill uttered as her eyes began to water with tears. "Please hang on!"

Then she saw it. While halting to a stop, she nearly tripped with the excessive weight she carried, but she was relieved when she saw a small area of rocky wall with a gaping mouth.

A cave.

She took off inside and was thankful that now they were out of the rain. Once she set down Metal carefully, she took a moment to catch her breath.

When she set him down, Metal's body fell limp, as the light in his eyes began flickering. " *...e-elp...* "

What could she do? Jill was hopeless when it came to robots; she just didn't know anything about them, or how to fix them like Boomer did. She highly doubted that she could simply heal the machine…it just didn't work like that.

"The Chaos Emerald!" Jill spoke aloud, remembering. Hurriedly, she tried to pry his chassis open.

With some effort, she eventually pried it open, revealing a green glow within Metal's body; the green Chaos Emerald.

Her main goal was to keep Metal from completely shutting down. "Maybe if I keep Chaos energy pulsing through him, it'll keep him online," she muttered; and since Purity can intertwine with Chaos, she could make it happen.

By putting a hand on the Chaos Emerald, Jill tried to concentrate on the energy inside to send it through the metallix.

Judging from a sudden jerk of his head, it seemed to be working, as Metal's eyes slowly, but surely, stopped flickering, and remained lit.

The longer Jill concentrated, the more she realized that one emerald wasn't going to be enough. "I need more power…" she mumbled. She was glad that there were two emeralds, but unfortunately she realized that she left her satchel behind back at the pond.

It came down to a risky decision; she'd have to go back and get it. Should she run, or should she borrow the emerald keeping Metal online to warp there and back?

Jill chose the second choice, since it would be so much quicker. "I'm sorry…" she muttered to Metal. "I have to borrow it for a minute…"

Without looking at Metal, she yanked out the emerald. "Chaos

Control!"

Within a green flash, she was gone.

Minutes later, she was back with the satchel and her coat in her hands. After having yanked the emerald out of Metal, she wondered what that did to him and she came over to check on him.

As she looked at him, she'd find that his eyes had began flickering again, but now, bordering more on the unlit side than the lit side. On top of that, his entire body seemed immobile.

Quickly, she stuck the green emerald back in the chassis, and she pulled out the white one from her satchel. "C'mon, work," she uttered, putting the two emeralds close together. Then she concentrated again on both their energies to send into the metallix.

At first, it didn't seem to have any effect. However, soon, Metal's right arm shot out, grabbing Jill's shoulder, as the light returned in his eyes. " *...thanks...* " he uttered.

"…Metal…" she would've cried tears of joy, but instead, she held it in as she wiped them away.

With a glance towards outside the cave, Metal groaned. " *...that might not have been the high-point of my career...* " he muttered, before closing his eyes. " *...I suppose we'll have to train indoors, until the weather lets up...* "

Jill nodded in agreement. She had a lump in her throat and couldn't speak; not only that, but she was so shaken up that she could break down any minute.

" *...hey.* " Metal said, as he glanced at her. " *If you have something to say... then say it.* "

"…I was so scared," she uttered. "I thought that would've done permanent damage to you…and that I wouldn't have been able to help you because I don't understand robots." At that point, Jill couldn't stop herself from burying her face and crying.

" *...heh.* " Metal scoffed, before suddenly wrapping one of his arms

around Jill, hugging her. " *To think that you'd actually be afraid of me being damaged by that... who would have thought?* " Then, brief silence, before... " *...I know this is going to make me look like a good guy, but... again, thank you.* "

Jill was surprised that Metal was hugging her, and it was enough to stop her crying. "...you're welcome," she muttered. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah..." Metal muttered, before he let go of Jill. *"Don't you worry about me..."* he said, before closing his eyes. *"...well, let's get to training. I may not be able to help you train your sword-arm, but there are other methods of training you can go through."*

"Alright," Jill said. When she stood up, she looked at the cave and saw that it went deeper in. It could be possible to train in the caverns... "Oh, Metal, do you need some help up?" she asked, realizing that she had momentarily forgotten about him.

"...I could use some assistance, yes," Metal nodded, as he looked up at Jill.

Jill had no second thoughts taking Metal by the arm and helping him up; still somehow possessing that amazing strength.

" *Ah, much better...* " Metal muttered, as he looked further ahead in the cave. " *I take it that you don't know what's down there, right?* "

"No, not really," Jill replied. "But I'm always enthusiastic about exploring." After picking up her satchel over her shoulder, a radiant ball of light suspended over her palm, and she began to walk further into the caverns.

Metal only looked about, as he scanned the walls of this cavern, trying to make out if there was anything special about the cave. " *...before all this began... were you usually exploring?* " he asked out of the blue.

"M-hm," Jill nodded.

" *I see...* " Metal hummed, as he looked ahead. " *...what do you suppose we'll find down here?* "

"Not sure," Jill replied; "Hopefully a large space where we can train."

Jill's ears suddenly perked up.

"I heard footsteps, up ahead," she said.

" *Footsteps?* " Metal mused, as he looked ahead. " *...who could it be?* "

Chapter 41

CHAPTER FOURTY-ONE

"Whoever you are, come out!" Jill called.

"Okay, okay Senorita, I will come out."

From around the corridor, a certain toucan walked out holding a lantern, with a spider girl behind him. It was Flamenco and Lin.

"You guys again?" Jill said.

"O-oh..." Lin uttered, as she saw Jill and Metal, before trying to hide behind Flamenco. "S-sorry if we d-disturbed you..." Then, she suddenly popped out behind Flamenco's back, an excited look in her eyes. "Now why is someone like Metal Sonic here?" she said.

" *...huh?* " Metal uttered, as he looked at Lin, before glancing at Flamenco. " *...what are you doing here, anyway?* "

"Well, we were originally going to accompany a group with this King, or whatever his name is," Flamenco said. "But a turn of events has caused a change of plans, and we ended up straying away." Then he shot Lin an annoyed look. "Then Lin went missing and I soon found out she had gone into these caverns in search of "shiny rocks" for her collection." Flamenco had emphasized the quotation on "shiny rocks" with his fingers.

"So now we have been lost in these caverns for a day now," he finished. "We saw your light and thought it was the end of the cave, but when we heard your voices, I found out I was wrong." Finally, the toucan let out a sigh, and muttered, *" No le pregunté por este problema…"*

" *...shiny rocks?* " Metal said with a tilt of his head.

"Yeah, shiny rocks!" Lin said, as she giggled. "It's a whole heck of a lot simpler to find them in caves than it is other places, right?" Then,

she suddenly turned timid again, as she looked away. "S-so, um... s-sorry for w-wasting your time..."

" *Not at all.* " Metal shrugged, as he glanced by the two. " *Say... did you find anything significant further down there?* "

"Not that I know of," Flamenco said. "The caverns are quite a labyrinth. If I'm stuck here any longer, I'll go loco."

"You sure there isn't anything?" Jill asked. "Not any strange things, like ancient relics or sacred pedestals? Nothing?"

Flamenco stared thoughtfully at Jill, rubbing his beak. "…actually, now that I think about it, I did see something interesting," he said. "It was the area where I found Lin."

"Lin, do you remember where it was?" Flamenco asked the spider, turning to her.

"Um..." Lin began, as she scratched her head, before looking behind her. "I th-think that it was in a cave leading to the left... w-we came out of a path that was on the r-right side, right?"

" *So you came out from the right side, meaning that it's a path to the left, from this viewpoint...* " Metal muttered, as he nodded. " *Thanks for the intel.* "

"Well, you're welcome!" Lin suddenly said, as she placed her functioning hands on her left hip, laughing loudly.

"As for getting out of here," Jill said, "we just came from down there." And she pointed behind her and Metal with a point. "There's an entrance over there, but there's a thunderstorm going on out there right now, so I'd be careful."

"Ah, muchas gracias Senorita," Flamenco said with a brief bow. He sure was relieved to hear that there was an exit to this place.

"Well, in that case, we won't bother you guys, then!" Lin said, as she grabbed Flamenco, before suddenly dashing down where Jill had pointed them. "See you later!" she called, before they were gone.

" *...somehow, I wonder why they weren't questioning us being together.* " Metal muttered, as he glanced further down the cave. " *...the path to the left...* "

"…but what could be down there?" Jill wondered. Like Lin told them, they walked further down the cave and saw two pathways, taking the left one. They walked for awhile before they came to a large area; which almost seemed more like a giant chamber.

Here, all around the place, where tiny green crystals that were somehow radiating, basking the chamber in a green light.

"Whoa…" Jill gasped. "So this is what they meant by shiny rocks."

" *...but what is this place, anyway?* " Metal uttered, as he looked around. " *It sure seems... convenient, to say the least.* "

Jill put her light out since it was possible to see without it, just when her eyes fell upon something on the other end of the chamber.

It was a small platform, and standing on it was some sort of podium.

When Jill approached it more closely, she noticed that it had a round console on it. "What's this?" she said, observing it.

" *I have no idea.* " Metal replied, as he observed the podium and console. " *...I don't suppose we should try and touch it?* " he muttered.

"I don't know."

Promptly, Jill touched the podium to see if something would happen, and nothing did. Then she felt the console. It was indented in a cone-like hole, but yet it seemed…blocky. Not only that, but the longer Jill observed it, the more it seemed familiar.

"Wait a minute," from her satchel, she pulled out the white Chaos Emerald and compared the bottom of it to the console.

It was a match.

"It looks like I can stick the Chaos Emerald here," Jill said. "Question

is, what'll it do?"

" *...I suppose it will power something up.* " Metal guessed, as he glanced at Jill. " *You might as well try it out.* "

Jill went ahead and placed the Chaos Emerald in there, and like she thought, it fit perfectly. At first, nothing happened. Then, it started to glow; brighter and brighter to a point that the entre chamber lit up, and burned out the green crystals.

Next thing Jill and Metal knew, they felt a minor shake in the ground.

There was a crack line that opened up on one wall of the cave in the shape of a doorway, and the block of wall was moving in, revealing a secret passageway.

" *...what do you know...* ?" Metal muttered, as he observed this secret pathway. Then, he glanced at the Chaos Emerald. " *I'm guessing that if we remove it, that pathway is going to close up.* " Then, he looked at Jill. " *Shall we see where it leads?* "

"Yeah," Jill said. Once the wall stopped moving, it showed a flight of stairs leading down.

Jill and Metal decided to proceed down the stairs with caution, and eventually, it led them to another chamber.

This chamber had smoother walls, unlike the rough cavern walls, and in the middle of it there was a vast body of water surrounding another platform, and access to the platform were a few stepping stones in a line. Stalactites from the ceiling were decorated with more of those green crystals that were aglow, lighting the room like ancient chandeliers.

Without thinking, Jill ran over and began crossing the stepping stones across the water to the platform.

However, that left Metal on his own on the other side, as he trudged towards the same stepping stones, watching Jill skip over them. *Great... the lightning bolt knocked out my jets. Guess I'll have to follow her example,* he thought, as he slowly leapt across, landing on one stepping stone at a time.

Once Jill got to the platform in the middle of the water, she looked around. "…just what is this place?" she said, not that her question would be answered anytime soon. As far as she was concerned, there wasn't anything here.

Or so she thought.

Metal would notice then that the water began to stir by itself.

As luck would have it, when he noticed that, he had only gotten halfway across. *...oh, now what?* he thought, before looking up at Jill. " *Stay frosty; I don't think we're alone.* "

"Hm?" Jill turned and looked around. What made Metal say that?

Just then, she saw it. Some of the water somehow crawled out and began slithering its way onto the platform Jill stood on. This caused her to freeze in bewilderment, watching this strange puddle slide toward her.

Then the water rose, and started to morph into something.

...oh, no... Quickly clenching his hands into fists, Metal began traversing the stepping stones again, approaching the island. " *Jill, watch out! If I'm not mistaken, you should back away from it!* "

Jill's eyes widened, and taking Metal's advice, she stepped away from it.

The water morphed into some sort of creature, which was embodied of water. It possessed three long fingers on each hand, as well as two long toes, and something of a brain was afloat in what looked like its head, behind a pair of glossy yellow-green eyes.

Jill recognized the being, from pictures that had been shown to her by Tails no less.

"Chaos," she uttered breathlessly.

And Chaos was continuing to approach Jill, staring at her curiously.

However, Metal soon intercepted Chaos, standing between him and

Jill. " *Careful; we don't know what he could do.* " he said to Jill, as he glared at the water creature.

Chaos stopped advancing when Metal came into the picture, and judging by the way it handled that, it wasn't happy to see Metal.

It let out a roar and extended its arm to punch the metallix out of the way.

The punch was enough to send the Metallix rocketing off the platform, causing him to land straight in the water, but he was quick to get on his feet. " *Ungh... it couldn't have come at a better time...* " he muttered, as he glared at Chaos. *Damn... I can't even use my nano-technology against him...* he thought, before he glanced at his hands. *...I could do that, but...*

With Metal out of the way, Chaos then looked back at Jill, but it was not in a way that was menacing. It still didn't change how uneasy Jill felt when it started to walk to her again.

"Don't come any closer!" Jill yelled, hoping to scare Chaos away.

It didn't.

Now Chaos extended a bulgy hand out to Jill, and by then, it stopped right in front of her.

"…huh?" Jill was confused by this, but it didn't look like Chaos was going to hurt her.

Blinking, Metal slowly approached the scene, taking care not to get too close, as he observed what was going on. *...what is Chaos trying to do?* he thought, as he tilted his head.

Jill looked at the hand, and then up at Chaos. It looked like she was supposed to take the hand, so she hesitantly reached for it. More than anything, it felt cold because of the water, but miraculously it wasn't wet.

Images flashed in her mind rapidly, covering the events of Chaos' release from the Master Emerald, its cooperation with Eggman, the encounters with Sonic and Tails, the Egg Carrier, becoming an

enormous monster, and being neutralized by Super Sonic.

Then an image of Tikal flashed just a moment longer than the others.

After that, she saw Chaos and Tikal returning to the Master Emerald.

Jill blinked, as she looked at Chaos. "…if you were sealed away in the Master Emerald, then what are you doing here, Chaos?" she asked.

At that moment, Chaos released her hand and went over to pull Metal out of the water, setting him down on the platform.

Metal blinked, as he looked at Chaos with a confused look. " *...um... thanks?* " he uttered, before glancing at Jill. " *I have no idea what's going on, and I guess that you don't, either.* "

"Nope, No clue," Jill shrugged, watching Chaos walk back to her. "… does it have something to do with what happened with the Master Emerald and Angel Island?"

Chaos nodded.

Jill was startled. "…you understand me?"

Chaos nodded again.

" *I think he can understand both of us.* " Metal said, as he folded his arms. " *I mean, he did team up with Eggman once, so I think he must have been able to understand what he was saying.* " Then, he glanced at Chaos. " *Let me guess; you're going to show us something important, via this platform?* "

Chaos nodded. From within the water, Chaos fished something out, which turned out to be the white Chaos Emerald that Jill had placed in the podium beforehand.

"How'd you—?" Jill was cut off by Chaos raising his hand.

In the center of the platform they stood on, another podium

appeared out of the ground. Chaos placed the emerald in the console, taking on a glow like before.

" *...I think it's best not to question it.* " Metal muttered, as he watched the podium. " *Let's see what happens...* "

The Chaos Emerald grew bright enough that a blinding flash occurred. Once Jill and Metal could see again, they found themselves floating in the air, looking down on an image that was adjusting.

It turned out to be the Master Emerald shrine on Angel Island, and a startled Knuckles was conversing with a desolate Tails.

"…are you serious?" the red echidna uttered. "He's gone? Sonic's gone?"

"...mhm..." Tails nodded, as he didn't look up at the echidna.

Seeing this, Metal's eyes widened. *...they're talking about Sonic...* he thought.

"A memory," Jill muttered, looking at Chaos. "But why are you showing us this?"

Chaos simply pointed at the scene, implying for Jill to keep watching.

"No...It can't be!" Knuckles uttered, holding back his tears. He threw his fist against a wall. "That's just...not like Sonic! First he disappears...and now he's dead?"

"I know..." Tails nodded, as he had his eyes shut tightly, holding his own tears back. "I... I can't believe it, either..."

"...he's dead?" Metal uttered, as he looked at Chaos. *"But... how?"*

"The Professor told me that Sonic's death was a big mystery," Jill replied instead. "No one knows what happened to him. They found his body in a river, and it looked like he drowned, but there were also unidentified marks on him." Jill looked at Metal then. "They later concluded that Sonic had been ambushed, but they never found out

who the perpetrator was."

"But he can't be!" Knuckles' yell interrupted Jill as he threw his fist into the wall again, making it crack. "…he can't be dead." His head hit the wall, and he started sobbing. Rouge's death was hard on him, especially since he didn't want to admit having missed her already, and when Eggman died, he thought it would've been the end of it.

Now Sonic the Hedgehog, hero of Mobius, was gone.

There was no way he could bury his feelings this time. Sonic was his best friend, despite the constant bickering and head butting they went through.

" *...an ambush...?* " Metal uttered, as he placed a hand against his head. " *...my entire ambition was destroyed... because of some ambush...?* "

"...Knuckles..." Tails uttered, as he looked at the echidna with teary eyes. While he wanted to say something to comfort his friend, the tragedy of the situation swallowed anything he could have been able to say.

Knuckles' sobs finally died down, but his head remained pressed against the wall. "…we need to hide the Chaos Emeralds," he finally said.

"...Shadow says the same thing." Tails nodded, as he looked at Knuckles. "He's already looking for them..."

"Good." Knuckles had a dark look on him, as he turned to Tails. "We have to make sure that no one ever abuses them again…for Sonic's sake."

"...yeah." Tails said with a nod, hiding his nervousness, due to the dark look Knuckles had. "For Sonic."

After that, the scene began to change. It was still at the shrine, but it looked as if a few years had past. Knuckles looked older, probably about his late 30s, but the age certainly had worn him down. He was fast asleep near the Master Emerald.

Or, at least he was. One eye suddenly peeked open. "Nice of you to visit, Shadow," he muttered.

"Had to drop in some time." Shadow muttered, as he appeared next to the Master Emerald, glancing at Knuckles. "Sorry for not being able to come earlier; work got in the way." Then, he closed his eyes. "How have you been?"

"…fine," Knuckles said. "Nothing much happens around here…" Then he looked up at the hedgehog from where he sat. "…are the Chaotix still trying to investigate Sonic's cause of death?"

"So far, the results have been inconclusive." Shadow muttered, as he opened his eyes, looking up at the sky. "It's gotten to the point where Espio's resorted to some brutal interrogation techniques against any lowly thug he can find... and not even with as much support as I can convince GUN to give, have they found anything..."

"A whole 20 years…" Knuckles growled. "…and still nothing." He got up and approached the Master Emerald, setting a hand on it. "…just what kind of bastard could've been sneaky enough to get away with it?"

"Espio has suspected Fang, among others, but I know that he couldn't pull off something like that." Shadow muttered. "And it can't be any of Eggman's machines, either; Metal's been gone ever since Sonic last fought him, and every other robot he had at his disposal should be deactivated."

"…what about those strange markings they found on him?" Knuckles asked, looking at the Master Emerald. "Did they make any connection with those yet?"

Why do I get the feeling I know what they're talking about? Jill wondered worriedly. Someone who was sneaky enough to get away with it…markings…

It sounded unsettlingly familiar.

"They still haven't found anything on that." Shadow muttered, as he glanced at Knuckles. "Tails has been looking into it, and even

though it's proven fruitless thus far, he hasn't given up." Then he sighed. "I'm afraid he's going to work himself to death over this..."

Knuckles sighed. He hadn't seen Tails since that day he found out Sonic was dead a long 20 years ago. He just didn't have the heart to see him.

Just then, they both heard the sound of helicopter propellers from the sky. Knuckles and Shadow turned to see a yellow chopper descending down near the shrine.

First one to pop out of it when the propellers died was Charmy. He was a young adult in his mid 20s now, and once he stepped out, he escorted Cream, who was the same age as him, and Amy, who was in her own mid 30s; just a bit younger than Knuckles was.

"Captain and Grandma Cream?" Jill uttered. She was amazed how full of life they looked to have; she was so used to their old age and weariness. "…and Amy."

"What brings you three here?" Knuckles asked, turning back to the Master Emerald coldly.

"We've got some terrible news…" Charmy gulped, holding out photos. "…the same guy who killed Sonic struck again."

"...what?" Hearing that, Shadow rushed down to Charmy, quickly grabbing the photos. "Who..."

Once Shadow had a glimpse of the photos, he could see that they were crime scene photos. It was of another body that was covered in strange markings; the same that they recognized on Sonic.

This time, the body belonged to Fang the Sniper.

"…I guess this numbered out Espio's suspicions," Amy croaked weakly.

Seeing Fang's body like that, Shadow dropped the photos in shock. "...him, too..." he muttered. "...just who the hell is doing this?" he said, looking down at the ground.

Jill tried to get a closer look at the photos, but from where she floated, it was impossible.

"Someone who is a true bad ass; pardon my language ladies," Charmy said. "But this mystery murderer cleans up his tracks impeccably well; no traceable fingerprints, no blood sample, or anything. It's as if this killer didn't really exist."

Knuckles pounded the Master Emerald, startling Amy and Cream. "NO! I can't let this go on anymore!" Then he hit the Master Emerald again, making it crack.

"Knuckles?" Cream blurted. "What are you doing?"

But Knuckles ignored her, rearing back for another punch. "CHAOS! YOU'RE COMING OUT OF THAT MASTER EMERALD!" his voice boomed, just as he would punch it again.

However, the moment Knuckles was about to punch the Master Emerald, Shadow suddenly appeared in front of him, grabbing his fist before he could shatter the emerald. "What good would bringing Chaos out do, Knuckles?" he said, as he was overpowering the echidna. "I'm as shocked about this as you are, but you have to calm yourself."

"Chaos is the God of Destruction, Shadow!" Knuckles roared in his face. "If anything can hunt down that killer, it can be him!"

"But Knuckles! You can't!" begged Amy. "There's been enough drama already! Please don't make even more!" Everyone could see that Amy was already in tears. Losing her Sonic was the biggest loss of her life.

"GET OUT OF THE WAY, SHADOW!" Knuckles screamed, ignoring Amy's pleads.

"...no." Shadow uttered calmly, as he only glared at Knuckles, without moving. "Step down, Knuckles."

Knuckles glared right back at Shadow, pushing back with no luck. Shadow retained his unnatural strength, while Knuckles' strength was withering away slowly with the flow of time. Finally, the red

echidna pulled away and knocked his fist into the wall again.

"…I'd better get back," Charmy said, taking Cream and Amy back to the helicopter. "I'll let you know if Vector, Espio or Mighty find anything else."

"...alright." Shadow said with a nod to the three, as he folded his arms, before glancing at Knuckles.

Once the helicopter took off again, Knuckles broke out into another sob in front of Shadow.

Then the scene changed again. It was nighttime, and Knuckles was looking up at the moon calmly. It looked like time had passed a little more again, for Knuckles was in his 40s now; just about 5 years since the last scene.

The crack in the Master Emerald remained since that day.

Suddenly, the Master Emerald began to glow. This called Knuckles' attention, glancing at it curiously. Soon, a grave look crossed his face. "Something's wrong…"

The crack in the emerald began to spread, and eventually, the emerald shattered completely. It knocked Knuckles back a few feet due to the incredible power.

" ... " Seeing that made Metal curious, as he glanced back at Chaos. " *I take it that you just broke out, right?* " he asked the water creature.

Chaos nodded.

Once Knuckles got to his feet, he peered over at where the Master Emerald used to be. "Chaos?" he uttered, seeing a puddle crawling toward him.

The puddle emerged to be Chaos indeed, and the beast was shorter than Knuckles had remembered. It looked at Knuckles with understanding, knowing the echidna's long term emotional pain.

"…please," Knuckles muttered, kneeling to Chaos. "You have to

help us…I can't stand not being able to avenge his death. All of us have grown apart since his death…I totally detached myself from all of them…"

Chaos set a hand on his shoulder, and nodded.

A large earthquake occurred, and Knuckles remembered that the Master Emerald was broken; which meant the island was falling from the sky.

They both waited until the shaking ceased, and that was when Chaos slithered away out of sight to hunt down the mystery murderer.

" *...did you find him?* " Metal asked, as he watched the scene. " *Please... tell me that you found out who did it, Chaos.* " As Jill would hear, Metal's tone actually sounded desperate, even though it didn't seem that way.

The present Chaos turned to Metal, and stared at him. Then it shook its head no, but pointed back to the scene occurring as Knuckles collapsed in exhaustion.

Then it became daytime, and for the first time in many years, Tails visited the island. Having been 25 years since he last saw Knuckles, he was in his mid 30s himself. Once he got to the emerald shrine, he'd find two shocking things.

1. Knuckles was knocked out on the ground, and 2. The Master Emerald was in pieces.

"...Knuckles!" Seeing Knuckles on the ground, Tails rushed towards him, before shaking his body, to wake him up. "Knuckles! Knuckles, what happened here? Why is the Master Emerald shattered?" he asked, as he tried waking up the red echidna. "Come on... wake up, Knuckles!"

Knuckles opened his eyes, and glanced over at him. "…Tails?" he was sure surprised to see him here. It had been so long…and Tails really had grown up. Shakily, Knuckles tried getting up, but stumbled back down weakly.

"Wait, you can't walk like that..." Tails muttered, as he grabbed hold of Knuckles, before pulling the echidna to his feet, giving him support. "Just what happened here, Knuckles?"

"…Chaos broke out of the Master Emerald," Knuckles muttered.

"He did?" Tails uttered in shock, as he glanced at the shards of the emerald. "...how did he manage to do that?" he said.

"I don't know…" Knuckles said. "5 years ago I wanted to break him out after hearing that Fang became another victim…but Shadow convinced me to give up on the idea…" Knuckles tried to walk to the pieces. "…I need to collect them and put the emerald together again…" but again, he was too weak as he tripped.

"H-hey, careful..." Tails said, as he was quick to heave Knuckles' arm over his own shoulder, giving the echidna a crutch of sorts, as Tails walked Knuckles towards the altar. "But... what about Chaos? Shouldn't we try and find him, before reassembling the Master Emerald?"

"No…" Knuckles uttered. "…because he went to go hunt down the killer…while I sit here wasting away each minute. I haven't been taking care of myself Tails…because of that, I think-" that minute, Knuckles collapsed again unconscious.

"Knuckles!" Seeing Knuckles collapse like that, Tails panicked. "...don't tell me that you've never moved away from Angel Island since he died..." he muttered, before pulling Knuckles up, dragging him towards a wall, which he placed the echidna up against, before sitting down by him.

"…how terrible," Jill uttered. "…but they must have been able to assemble the Master Emerald again, because it's still floating in the sky."

Chaos nodded, and again, the scene shifted.

There were bandages wrapped around Knuckles, but he was at the shrine, with Tails and Amy with raised arms, preparing to assemble the Master Emerald completely again.

In a green flash, it was pieced together again in its shining glory.

"Thank goodness," Amy sighed with relief.

"It's back together..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed his forehead with a sigh of relief. "It took us a while, but it's done."

Knuckles, however, stood there staring at the Master Emerald.

"…Knuckles?" Amy asked worriedly.

"…something's still wrong," Knuckles said. "…there's something about the Master Emerald that doesn't seem right for some reason."

Just then, a deathly roar sounded, shaking the trees and scaring the birds into the sky, which immediately caught the attention of the three, as well as Jill and Metal.

"…Chaos?" Knuckles uttered. Without warning, the echidna took off running into the trees.

"Knuckles?" Tails yelled when Knuckles took off. "H-hey! Wait up!" he called, before looking at Amy. "We should follow him; he could end up in trouble, otherwise!" he said, before grabbing hold of Amy, just as he flied after Knuckles.

While Tails and Amy ran off after where Knuckles had run, Jill was shaking.

"…that wasn't Chaos roaring…" she uttered in fear.

" *...it wasn't?* " Metal uttered, as he glanced at Jill. " *If it wasn't Chaos... then what was it?* "

Jill didn't answer, because the scene was taking off, following Tails and Amy as they tried to follow Knuckles despite the fact that they didn't see him.

Then another roar called out, but this time, it sounded like Knuckles.

It sounded like he was in horrible pain.

"Knuckles!" Amy cried helplessly, picking up the pace.

The two of them made it to a clearing, and the only thing they saw was Knuckles lying on the ground, motionless.

"Knuckles!" Tails yelled, as he rushed to the echidna's side, shaking his body. "Knuckles... come on, get up!" he pleaded.

Tails turned over the echidna, and then he'd see the horror of it. Across Knuckles' face were those cursed markings; they looked like swollen bruises that were blotched and cut across. His eyes were open, but they were lifelessly staring into space.

Knuckles was dead.

"No!" Amy gasped, tearing up.

"...Knuckles..." Tails uttered, as he stepped away from the echidna's body, looking at it with a horrified look. "N-no..." he croaked, as tears began rolling down his cheeks. "No... not you, too..."

Jill was the one who was probably the most horrified of all…

…because she recognized those markings.

But before she could speak, a certain yellow helicopter loomed overhead, with Vector, Espio and Charmy riding aboard. While Vector and Espio were quite old, Charmy looked not much younger than Tails.

"Vector, land the chopper!" Charmy blurted.

"I'm on it, I'm on it!" Vector called, as the chopper moved towards the ground. But before it could touch down, Espio leapt out and gracefully landed on the ground, before he saw Knuckles' body.

"...him, too...?" the chameleon uttered, as his eyes widened.

Charmy didn't bother waiting either, because he flew right out with Espio and confronted Knuckles' body in shock. Then after a moment, he turned to Tails and Amy. "What happened?" he asked. "Did you see anything?"

Amy shook her head, weeping. "We heard a strange roar, and Knuckles thought it was Chaos so he ran after it…we tried to follow him but we lost him…and then we found him like this!" she burst into more tears, and Charmy lent her a shoulder to cry on as he looked back at Knuckles.

"Dammit..." Vector muttered, as he stepped out of the chopper, before approaching Knuckles' body. "Of all the people this could've happened to... why you?"

"...we should go." Espio muttered, as he looked around. "Whoever did this could still be around here..." Then, he glanced at Tails, who was still looking at Knuckles' body. "...Tails?" he said, but that garnered no response from the fox. "Tails!" Still, no response.

If Espio's call won't get his attention, then maybe a sudden earthquake would.

Amy stopped crying and gasped again, "what's going on now?"

"The only reason it would shake was if something happened to the…" Charmy suddenly made a fatal connection. "The Master Emerald! You guys left it alone!"

"...the Master Emerald...?" Tails uttered, as he looked up from Knuckles, glancing back at where they had come from. Then, suddenly springing to his feet, he made a run for the woods, but Espio quickly grabbed him before he could get too far.

"Tails, we can't stay here!" Espio protested, as he kept Tails from running. "We have to get away from Angel Island!"

"But we can't leave the Master Emerald!" Tails yelled, as he tried getting out of Espio's grip, but to no avail, as the chameleon pushed him towards the chopper. "The killer could be there!"

"Right now, we've just gotta get away!" Vector called, as he grabbed Knuckles' body, before getting into the chopper. "Charmy, Amy, we're going! Hurry up!"

"Right!" Charmy brought Amy aboard the chopper. Then he looked back at Knuckles. "Knuckles…" he muttered. "…you were one of the

coolest people I knew. Whatever got you, Fang, and Sonic…I promise that I'll solve the case."

And unfortunately to them, they had no choice but to leave Knuckles' body lying there, because the helicopter could only handle so much weight.

Once the helicopter took off, they got a view of the shrine from the air.

The Master Emerald was pulsing with unreal energy…green sparks of electricity were sparking around it. A dark atmosphere surrounded the raging emerald.

"Oh my god," Amy uttered, watching it.

Tails, on the other hand, was silent, as he watched the Master Emerald in shock.

"I don't like the looks of that..." Espio muttered, as he quickly glanced at Vector. "Hurry up and take us out of here; I don't want to be near that."

"Don't worry, I'm on that!" Vector said, as the chopper flew away from the island.

The helicopter took off quickly, and some of them continued to watch as the emerald released its energy out. Its energy began to swallow the shrine, and then the island, bit by bit.

Jill admitted that Tails description of the event wasn't far off. It really was like a black hole consuming the island whole.

Storm clouds built up around the island, starting to hide the inward destruction that was occurring, and once it was fully covered in storm clouds, Amy turned away and sobbed on Charmy's shoulder again.

Tails, however, only kept looking at the place where Angel Island had been, with an absolutely devastated look on his face.

" *...please.* " Metal finally uttered, as he was looking down, not

looking at any of the people in the flashback. " *Please... tell me that it's over.* "

Just as Metal hoped, the scene came to an end by fading away to darkness. Next thing they knew, they were standing back in the chamber in the caverns again, and Chaos pulled the Chaos Emerald out of the podium, handing it to Jill.

As he did that, however, Metal started off walking towards the entrance, without looking back at Jill and Chaos. " *...we're leaving. Now.* " he uttered.

Jill looked at Metal with concern, and then back at Chaos. "I'm sure we'll see each other again," Jill said.

Chaos regarded another nod, allowing Jill to follow Metal up the stairs and into the previous chamber, where the secret passageway resealed itself back up.

Chapter 42

CHAPTER FOURTY-TWQ

"…Metal?" Jill said, setting a hand on his shoulder.

The moment she did that, however, Metal suddenly spun around, grabbing her own shoulders, as he looked straight into Jill's eyes. " *...let me talk to him.* " he uttered in a murderous tone.

"What?" Jill was quite startled by that tone in Metal's voice, as well as that demand.

" *You said so yourself.* " Metal continued, as his grip on Jill's shoulders strengthened. " *You can commune with Sonic and his friends from beyond the grave... so ask him! Ask him what it was that killed him!* " At that point, his eyes suddenly took on a brilliant red glow. " *DO IT!* "

"Metal, I can't!" Jill yelled back, feeling the ache in her shoulders from Metal's grip. "It doesn't work like that! I don't reach them; they reach me! Do you think I'd lie to you if I could? If I could, so many of my own questions would already be answered!"

Metal didn't reply, as Jill could see that his arms were trembling, likely from sheer anger. Then, as he let go of her, he let out a positively terrifying yell, before suddenly swinging his right arm at Jill.

Jill didn't expect that. That blow knocked Jill against the wall brutally and then fell on the ground, shaking the wall enough that some of the green crystals from the ceiling fell to the ground next to her.

Metal didn't move from where he stood, as he only glared at Jill lying on the floor, breathing heavily. At that point, he sank to his knees, as he looked down at the ground, completely silent.

Getting up, Jill looked at Metal cautiously.

" *...I shouldn't have done that...* " Metal muttered, without looking up. Strangely enough, his voice was shaky, and again, his arms were trembling, though not with anger. " *...I can't do it... but right now... I feel like crying...* "

Jill walked over to him, and set her hands on his shoulders. "I'm sorry Metal," she uttered.

At that point, Metal suddenly grabbed Jill in a hug, as he weakly knocked his fist against Jill's back repeatedly. " *Gods, I feel like a fool, for acting like this...* " he uttered. " *If you can hear me, Sonic... go ahead and laugh. Laugh out loud... so I can hear you from the other side...* " Then, he stopped moving his arm. " *I... fully endorse it, now.* "

Jill heard no laughter in her mind, and she put her own arms around Metal in sympathy. "Calm down Metal," she whispered. "Please."

However, Metal made no reply, as he simply held onto Jill, in complete silence.

She didn't know how much it really had affected him up until now, and she was very surprised that Metal was actually acting this way. Jill closed her eyes and hugged him; unaware of what was happening to her.

"...everything's going to be alright, Metal..."

She radiated with a warm light that Metal could see and even feel, and Metal would also see that somehow...

...Jill was in her holy form.

But she didn't know it because her eyes were closed. All she knew was that she wanted to help Metal feel better, as she continued to hug him with the warmth of her arms.

Seeing that she had taken her holy form, Metal blinked, but he didn't move, as he closed his eyes. *"...thank you..."* he muttered.

" *You're welcome,"* Jill replied. Then she opened her eyes, and saw what became of her. She released Metal in surprise, looking at

herself.

"… *how did this happen?"* she wondered in awe.

" *...I have no idea...* " Metal mused, as he watched Jill in her Holy form. " *...but I think we can use this for training purposes. How long do you usually last while in that form?* "

" *I don't know,"* Jill said with a shrug. *"It depends."*

By then, her glow faded and she reverted back to her normal self.

"…so much for that," Jill muttered.

" *...hrm.* " Metal scoffed, as he stood back up, before reaching his arm out to Jill. " *...since you've shown great progress when it comes to handling your fear of fire, we'll try practicing endurance for today.* " Somehow, even after his little break-down, Metal seemed much more relaxed, now.

And Jill noticed his relaxation, which relieved her to some degree. To what he said, she nodded.

"It just HAD to rain," Callous growled, standing under a cluster of trees to stay dry as the rain poured relentlessly.

"Eh, I've had worse things happen." Johnny shrugged, as he looked up at the sky. "A little rain isn't gonna be the end of us."

Callous didn't respond to Johnny, continuing to stare grudgingly at the rain.

Soon, Bloom and Gloom emerged from some shrubbery and spotted Callous and Johnny.

"There you two are," Callous said as they approached her. "How goes it?"

Bloom and Gloom shared a nervous look. "This really adorable doll, which turned out to be not so adorable, came and stopped us from even getting inside the tree house," Bloom began to explain. "We hid nearby long enough to hear that Metal Sonic sent him to protect

them."

Callous rubbed her chin. "What a coincidence. Cal was sent to stop us as well…it seems like Metal is trying to take charge of things."

"I doubt he's very happy about doing it, though." Johnny shrugged, as he glanced at Callous. "...say, what kind of friends does Jill have at that clubhouse, anyway?" he asked.

"Most of them are children," Callous said. "The bull is her boyfriend…" Callous glanced at Johnny then. "…now that I think about it, you look an awful lot like one of them."

"...I do?" Johnny uttered, as he raised an eyebrow. "...and what's the kid's name?"

"He's actually older than Jill, but he acts like the rest of the children," Callous said, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Oh what was his name again?"

"…Jack, I think was his name," she finally said, looking back at Johnny.

"...Jack..." Johnny noted, as he rubbed his own chin. "...tell me something, Callous; can I use Corruption to change my appearance?"

"If you're good enough with Corruption," Callous said. "What are you planning?"

"One thing they taught us fifteen years ago..." Johnny began, as he smirked. "...is that pretending to be a friend of your target makes it easier to strike." Then, he snapped his fingers. "And if we both look alike... then it shouldn't take much effort to pretend, would it?"

Callous smirked as well, "Good thinking."

"That means we'll have to get the real Jack then," Bloom said. "We can't have two Jacks running around."

"Hey, he's more or less a kid, right?" Johnny noted, as he chuckled. "All we have to do is wait until they decide to come out and play, and

then I'll surprise him when he goes off on his own. Then..." At that point, an evil smirk crawled across his face. "...Callous can pull him into the dark."

Callous laughed. "That plan couldn't be any better!"

"I guess we have to wait until the rain stops," Bloom said, looking up at the drops that hit her forehead. "They won't come out to play in the rain."

"You never know Bloom," Callous said. "They're kids. They're fickle and might decide to jump in a few puddles."

"All we have to do is to be patient." Johnny noted, as he looked up at the rain again. "...this is bound to be an interesting experience." he said, grinning.

Callous didn't mind being patient.

She just hated the rain and wished it would stop.

The sun rose and morning came, but it was still clouded by the thunderstorm that had gone on for awhile now.

Charmy was looking out the window at this storm, rubbing his chin. "Looks like we're stuck inside for now," he murmured.

"There's nothing we can do about it but to wait." Queen noted, as she looked out the window with a calm look. "Nature is a fickle mistress..."

"That she is, Queen," Charmy agreed. "That she is."

"Captain," Boomer said, popping in the doorway. "Ripper's awake."

"Ah, that's good," Charmy said, smiling. "How is he doing?"

"He was confused about where he was, but he's okay," Boomer replied.

"...it's good to hear that he's alright." Queen said, as she sighed.

At that point, King suddenly popped in the doorway as well. "Ah, Dusk, there you are! Everyone, to Noon's room! Emergency meeting, now!" Then, he ran right past Boomer.

"...emergency meeting?" Queen uttered, as she blinked. "What has King thought of, now?"

"Who knows," Boomer said with a shrug. "We'll find out when we get there, I guess."

Charmy silently followed Boomer and Queen to Noon's room, wondering if this was about how Ripper escaped Callous' control.

When they arrived, to their surprise, they would see that Wiper, Miser, Sage, Hunter and Newt already were there, along with King and Ripper, the latter still in his bed. "Kekekekeke... does anyone but King know what's going on?" Ripper uttered.

"I'm sure that he'll explain himself soon." Wiper muttered, as he glanced at King, who was patiently waiting for Queen, Boomer and Charmy to enter.

Finally, the three last entered into the room. Boomer joined by Newt, and Charmy sat next to Hunter. "So, what's all this about?" Charmy asked.

"Alright..." King muttered, as he suddenly punched his palm, grinning. "Now that all of us are here, we can get started!"

"Don't tell me; your warrior nation *again?* " Wiper groaned.

"...no, that's not it." Sage said, as she looked at King in disbelief. "...you're kidding."

"I'm not, Sunrise!" King said, as he suddenly pointed at Wiper. "While Jill's busy training, we can't just sit here and wait for GUN to try attacking us! Therefore, I've decided that we're going to save the GUN Commander!"

"Are you crazy King?" Hunter growled, shooting to his feet. "We can't afford to do something like that!"

"Don't be so quick to react, Hunter," Charmy assured, motioning for the wolf to sit back down. Then he turned to King, "I'm guessing you've already got a plan going, haven't you?"

"First of all, we need to find out where she is being kept." King said, as he gave Wiper a nod. "Wiper, call them up."

"Me?" Wiper uttered, as he tilted his head. "Why?"

"Easy; no one at GUN knows that we're with you, and they still think that you're their lapdog!" King retorted, as he grinned. "It's all you, Dawn!"

"...lapdog is a bit extreme..." Wiper muttered, as he pressed his finger against his ear. "I need everyone to be completely silent, okay?"

Wiper got some nods as a reply, while the room fell dead silent.

"Alright, here goes..." Wiper muttered, as he pressed the communicator in his ear. At first, he got no reply, but soon...

"Ah, agent Wiper." a male voice responded through the communicator. *"How are you doing?"*

"...just fine... Colonel." Wiper muttered. "Sorry about that outburst of mine yesterday; it was uncalled for."

"No, no, don't apologize." the voice responded. *"I should probably have contacted you in advance, regarding Johnny... well, no matter. What are you calling for?"*

Geez…you can really hear that thing, Boomer thought.

"Listen, Colonel..." Wiper began, as he scratched his neck. "I have to ask; after the GUN Commander was detained, where was she taken?"

"Ah, the GUN Commander." the colonel chuckled. *"We took her to the HQ in Station Square, for questioning regarding leaked information. We suspect that she might be siding with the GUN Renegades."*

"Right..." Wiper nodded. "...but how long will this questioning take?"

"Who knows? We need to make sure that she's really not trying to abuse her position... I take it that you only wanted to ask of that?"

"...yes." Wiper nodded. "Thank you for answering my questions."

"Anytime, Wiper. Anytime." At that point, the line cut off.

Having heard that, Boomer clenched her teeth. "I can't believe GUN would do something like this…"

"You wouldn't believe the other stuff they've done either," Hunter remarked.

"That's a story for later." King said, as he cracked his knuckles. "Now we know where she's being kept... so now, we just go and attack!"

"Charging head-on, without any strategy?" Sage uttered, as she raised an eyebrow. "That's not going to help, King; we need an attack plan."

"Sage is right, King," Charmy chuckled. "But that idea is a good way to start."

"What do you mean?" Hunter asked.

"We could charge head-on against the troops," Charmy said, "allowing some of the agents slip through in stealth and sneak out the Commander while the solders are busy with the raiders on the frontlines."

"You came up with a plan that quickly?" Boomer asked.

"Don't underestimate me Boomer," Charmy said with a grin. "I am a Captain of a Detective Agency after all." *Not to mention that Espio's taught me a thing or two about missions like these,* he thought.

"That only leaves one thing..." Queen mused, as she glanced at Charmy. "...how should we be grouped?"

"Simple!" King said, as he stretched his arms out. "Me, Miser, Ripper and Sage will charge them, while Wiper, Queen and Hunter go after the Commander."

"What about us, y'know?" Newt noted, as he tilted his head. "Ain't we gonna help out?"

"Well..." Sage mused. "...I'd feel a bit safer if *only* the agents charged in. Not that I doubt that you can hold your own, but she's likely to be heavily guarded. We're not risking anyone's life on this."

"Besides," Hunter said, "I'd appreciate it if someone remained here to take care of Ani."

Boomer opened her mouth to protest, but Charmy cut her off, "And you're still in no condition to go into battle Boomer. You may not be bed-ridden, but still, you should remain here."

Boomer folded her arms and pouted, but didn't bother to argue after that.

"Then it's settled!" King said, as he clenched his hands into fists. "We leave the moment the storm lets up! For now... let's eat! I'll go make breakfast for us!"

"...you know, maybe someone who can *cook* should do that, King." Sage noted, as she placed a hand on the tiger's shoulder, before looking at Miser. "You can go ahead and make breakfast, Miser."

"Um... alright." Miser nodded, as she walked out of the room, headed for the kitchen.

"…but I do have to wonder," Boomer said after awhile, turning to Ripper. "What happened to you?" she asked. "I mean, we all suspect Jill saved you from Callous' control…but what exactly happened?"

"...kekekeke..." Ripper chuckled, as he tapped his head in thought. "...she saved me from the dark..."

"That's kinda vague, ain't it?" Newt noted, as he tilted his head. "I mean, didn't she do that when she purified you, y'know?"

"...it's all a blur, really... kekekeke..." Ripper replied. "The dark tried taking me away... but she stood by me, before it could swallow us..."

"...I suppose we'll have to ask Jill, when she returns." Wiper said.

"In the meantime, I think I'll reconnect with Tails and see how he and the kids are doing," Charmy said, getting up from his seat.

"You go do that." Queen said with a nod to Charmy, before looking out the window. "...it could take a while for it to let up, it seems..."

"Oh, I want to warn you Captain," Boomer said. "I was in the office not too long ago and I pulled out some of the case files to look at."

"Thanks for the warning Boomer," Charmy replied.

Once Charmy left the room, he headed down the hall and into the said office. At the desk, there were indeed a few files lying on its surface. Charmy hadn't really paid attention to the files until he picked up the phone and began dialing Tails. His eyes widened to see the file that was on the desk.

Sticking out of one of them was that dreaded crime scene photo of Fang the Sniper.

… *why did Boomer pull out that one?* He wondered nervously, while the line was ringing.

Soon, the line picked up. *"Hello?"* Tails said from the other connection.

Charmy was silently staring at the file, and it took him a minute to realize Tails was on the other line. "Hi Tails, its Charmy," he muttered. "I just called to check up."

"Is that so?" Tails noted. *"Well, everything's fine here. You just so happened to wake me up, though..."* he chuckled. *"What about you, Charmy? How are things back at the HQ?"*

"Well, for starters, Proxy brought Ripper back to us," Charmy continued, trying to take his eyes off the case file on the desk. "Not only that, but he was no longer under Callous' control."

That's a relief..." Tails said with a sigh. *"Anything else?"*

"King and his group are planning to rescue the GUN Commander, apparently," Charmy said.

"Are they?" Tails uttered in surprise. *"Hrm... well, I hope that they don't get themselves in too big a mess... by the way, are Boomer and Ani doing better?"*

"Boomer's doing fine," Charmy said. "As for Ani…well…there's a story I aught to tell you about that."

"Yesterday, Callous attempted another attack on us, and this time she brought a friend with her. His name is Johnny, and he happens to be a bad part of the past with King and his group. Anyhow, he found them and Wiper went out to battle him, only to discover that Johnny was pitiful…that is, until Callous decided to lend him the use of Corruption. After that, it didn't seem good."

"I went to find and move Ani somewhere safer, when all of a sudden, she woke up."

"…and became a beast."

"...a beast?" Tails uttered in a surprised tone. *"How on earth... but then what happened?"*

"Ani kicked BOTH Johnny's and Callous' butts, to say the least!" Charmy laughed. Then he thought about it. "…Tails, do you remember when you showed me the footage of Sonic fighting when he was a Were-Hog; back when Eggman released Dark Gaia?"

"...yes..." Tails replied. *"But what does that have to do with Ani?"*

"…Ani went through a very similar transformation," Charmy said. "In fact, she had some of the exact same abilities. She even stretched her arm to punch Johnny in the face when he stood about a yard away from her."

"Really..." Tails mused. *"...but how could she have abilities like the Were-Hog? Unless... you don't think that it could be due to Corruption, do you?"*

"We suspect Corruption is what triggered it in Ani," Charmy replied. "Not only that, but it was as if Corruption was ineffective against her, Tails. That's why she fought them without a sweat…"

"She's immune to Corruption?" Tails uttered in surprise. *"I'll be... but is she still in that form?"*

"No, she reverted back to normal when she fell back asleep," Charmy continued, "which leads to the next part of the story."

"We all had Callous and Johnny surrounded, and Sage told them to leave. At first, Callous was undaunted…but then she got a look of pure terror in her eyes. Then she turned and left with Johnny without another question."

"As it turned out, there was someone else nearby who scared Callous off."

"...and who was this other person?" Tails inquired.

"It was a strange woman," Charmy replied. "She introduced herself as Goddess…and she happens to be Jill's mother according to Hunter."

"Jill's mother?" Tails uttered. *"...strange... but what was she doing there?"*

"She told us that long ago, she delivered Ani's birth because her mother was suffering under the influence of Corruption," Charmy said, "and she did that in order to save Ani. She also said she blessed Ani with incredible strength to repel Corruption, so it explained why it didn't affect her when she fought Callous and Johnny."

"Hunter yelled at her because he believed that this woman let Ani's mother die in ignorance, but in reality, Ani's mother had requested that her daughter be saved."

"...I see." Tails said, as he waited for Charmy to continue.

"Once she left, that was pretty much the end of it…" Charmy finished.

But a though occurred to him. "The things that are happening are digging up the past in many people, Tails." He glanced again at the case file on the desk. "…it could very well dig up our own past as well."

"...there are some things from our past that I'd rather forget about..." Tails sighed. *"I just hope that whatever happened in our past doesn't occur again."*

Charmy was silent that moment.

"...Charmy?" Tails uttered. *"Is something the matter?"*

"…no," the bee answered, even though he continued to stare at that case file. "I should probably let you go Tails. Sorry I woke you up."

"Don't worry about it, Charmy." Tails said. *"Talk to you later, then."* Then he hung up.

Charmy took a minute to hang the phone up himself, with his eyes locked on the case file.

"Captain?" Boomer and Newt entered into the office, and when she saw him staring at the case file, she scratched her head nervously. "Was I…not allowed to take that one out, Captain?"

"…why did you pull it out Boomer?" Charmy asked, looking up at her.

"I happened on it by accident," Boomer said. "It was under the cold cases, and I…" she shuffled her feet. "…I was curious."

Charmy looked at her longer, and then turned to Newt. "Did you see it too?"

"...yeah." Newt admitted, as he scratched his head. "Got me curious too, y'know."

Charmy looked at them awhile longer. Then he glanced at the file again. "…you're free to look at it," he said, walking past them out of the office. "But don't get any crazy ideas of bringing it up and trying to solve it."

When Charmy disappeared down the hall, Boomer watched worriedly. "…I never saw him like that before," she muttered.

"...that file must really have him spooked." Newt deduced, as he cautiously grabbed the file, taking a closer look. "I can see why; this picture could give anyone nightmares, y'know."

Boomer took the file from Newt, opened it up, and browsed through the different crime photos. Some were of this Fang the Sniper.

The others were of Sonic the Hedgehog.

Boomer was silent while looking at them. "...I can't believe something like this happened," she finally muttered weakly.

"...neither can I, y'know." Newt muttered. "What kinda markings are those supposed to be, anyway?"

Boomer looked more closely at the markings on the two bodies.

"...oh my god," she uttered with wide eyes of realization. "I've seen these kind of markings before!"

"Huh? You have?" Newt uttered, as he looked at the markings. "Where did ya see them?"

Boomer looked up at Newt. "On my back," she gulped. "Jill healed it, so it's faded and shaped differently than these ones, but…"

"Wait... your back?" Newt uttered, as he looked from the photos to Boomer. "That's where Callous hit you full-force with Corruption..." At that point, he looked at the photos again. "Wait... so does that mean that..."

Boomer dropped the file onto the ground. "…it means that someone who could use Corruption attacked them; and killed them."

"...but who could it have been?" Newt uttered. "And more importantly... there's been people who could use Corruption that long ago?"

"I don't know who it could be," Boomer said. "But it's obvious

whoever did that had a very deadly precision…"

Back in the hall, Charmy had passed by Wiper then, and suddenly stopped. He thought he saw something. Turning to look, Charmy's eye fell upon the wound on Wiper's abdomen.

Why he hadn't noticed it before, he didn't know…

…but Wiper's wound bore a very familiar marking.

Wiper blinked, as he stopped walking through the hallway, glancing behind him to look at Charmy. "...is something the matter?" he asked.

Charmy didn't respond at first. "…nothing," he finally replied, "it's just that…your wound looks a little different now."

"...it does?" Wiper uttered, as he glanced down at it. "...now that you mention it... it kind of does." Then, he looked back at Charmy. "Why do you suppose that is?"

"…I don't know." Charmy walked away then, keeping it to himself.

Like Tails, he didn't want to think about that.

The case had been cold a long time; Vector and Espio died with the knowledge that they failed to solve the case, leaving the burden on Charmy's shoulders, but he just didn't want to think about that.

Chapter 43

CHAPTER FOURTY-THREE

"Lousy rain," Brick grumbled.

"I dunno; I kinda like rain." Natal shrugged, as she was looking out the window. "It keeps me at peace... sort of."

"Well, I guess," Brick said with a shrug. "It puts a damper on some plans though."

"It'll probably let up, soon." Natal said, as she glanced at Brick. "In the meantime, we could make breakfast for the kids, before they wake up."

"Sure," Brick said. "But nothing chock full of sugar. I don't want them wound up."

"Got it." Natal nodded, as she moved away from the window, stretching her arms out. "Oh, yeah, I think Proxy, Whisker and Tails Doll are out by the entrance. Could you check up on them?" she asked, before heading to the kitchen.

"Yeah," Brick got up from where he sat and walked another direction.

While walking through the hall, he smiled. It was good to be home in the Clubhouse again, and it felt so good sleeping in his bed.

Even then, his smile fell when he thought about Jill again. He hoped she was alright…especially since he found out that Metal Sonic was her mentor for her training.

What was Jill thinking?

…what was Metal Sonic thinking?

Brick found the trio he was looking for and stopped short of his thoughts. "Hey guys," he said. "How's it going?"

Glancing at Brick, Proxy gave him a nod. "It goes fine. We were just watching the weather."

" *Yeah, it looks like it's going to be like this for a while...* " Tails Doll muttered, as he sighed. " *I hope Big Bro doesn't get wet...* "

"I jus' hope 't`ll let up, soon." Whisker noted. "I be plannin' on explorin' th' place wi' th' kids later on!"

"Yeah, I hope it dies down too," Brick murmured, sitting down. Sooner or later, Brick started thinking about Jill again.

"...wondering about Jill, huh?" Proxy guessed, as he glanced at Brick.

Brick jolted in defensive surprise, and then he looked away sheepishly. "…yeah," he muttered.

" *Oh, don't worry; I'm sure that she's fine!* " Tails Doll said encouragingly.

"Aye, ye`ve got t' be havin' faith in th' lass'!" Whisker said, as he patted Brick on his back.

"Oof!" Being a robot, Whisker gave Brick a pretty hard pat. After coughing, Brick managed a smile. "If you guys say so."

"That`s th' spirit!" Whisker laughed, as he began walking off. "Now keep yer chin up, Brick!"

" *Aah, wait up, Captain Whisker!* " Tails Doll called, as he flew after Whisker.

"...some kind of crew we are." Proxy noted with a smirk, as he looked out the window.

"Sure, let's go with that," Brick said.

Meanwhile, Milo was wandering down another hall by himself. He looked back and forth nervously. "There's that feeling again…" he murmured to himself.

"Hiii, Milo!" All of a sudden, Jack appeared behind Milo, placing a hand on the smaller lion's shoulder. "What's up?" he said with a smile.

"I don't know," Milo replied strangely. "I'm getting a weird feeling, and it feels bad for some reason…"

"Weird feeling?" Jack said, as he tilted his head. "Maybe you're just hungry?"

Milo looked at Jack for a minute. "…maybe that's it," he said, nodding as he relaxed a bit.

Hearing that, Jack smiled. "Hey, Milo! Whisker wondered if we could show him around the jungle later on, so how about we show him around after breakfast? It could be fun!"

"…what about the rain?" Milo asked. "We could catch a cold."

"But then we won't have to do chores until we get better!" Jack noted, as he had a huge grin on his face, probably at the thought of skipping chores. "Come on, it'll be fun, I promise!"

"…I don't know," Milo said, rubbing his arm nervously. Whatever feeling he was getting was growing worse as Jack pressured him. "…I guess we could."

"Woo-hoo!" Jack cheered, as he rubbed Milo's head. "Thanks, Milo! This is gonna be awesome!" he said happily, before he rushed past Milo, down the hall.

Milo watched Jack running away, almost in slow motion. The bad feeling inside of him told him that something was going to happen to him.

"Milo?" Milo turned quickly and saw Striker and Rudy standing there. "Is there something wrong?" Striker asked. "You don't look good."

"I think I'm just hungry," Milo said, in assurance of himself.

"Yeah?" Rudy said, smiling. "Me too! I wonder if anyone's making breakfast!"

"I think so, because something smells good!" Striker said, sniffing the air.

"It's ready! Come and get some breakfast, people!" they could hear Natal call from somewhere; most likely, the kitchen.

Striker and Rudy swept past Milo, leaving the little lion cub in the dust. He was hesitant about joining them, because the bad feeling inside him brought some slight dread about going outside.

Catching a cold would be the least of his worries.

" *So...* " Back at the mouth of the cave, Metal was leaning against the wall, looking at Jill. " *...are you capable of entering that holy form at will?* "

"I don't know," Jill replied, while she was sitting on the floor of the cave watching the rain outside. "All I know is that when my emotion is unstable, that power bursts out and I automatically transform, but after what happened a few minutes ago…I'm just not sure. It could be possible."

" *We should try it,* " Metal said, as he closed his eyes. " *If you can access that form at will, without losing control of yourself, you'll have an advantage over Callous.* "

"…I don't know where to start though," Jill admitted.

" *I think I have an idea,* " Metal noted. " *Try focusing Purity around your body, like an aura. If I'm not mistaken, your holy form should be something like that.* "

Jill thought about it, and then stood up with arms out, closing her eyes to concentrate. Sooner or later, a delicate air began to arise and Jill defied gravity as her clothes danced.

Stepping a bit away from Jill, Metal observed her. *...is this going to work?*

She made herself relax with deep breaths while this went on. At first, nothing was happening. Jill tried to think back at what happened before; wondering what caused her to transform. Emotions seemed

to have a key part in the transformation, and she knew she hadn't felt any strong emotions before when it happened.

No, that wasn't true. She did feel a strong emotion right then, but it wasn't extreme grief, stress, or anger.

It was compassion.

Once she figured it out, her feet came off the ground and she was floating. Most of the invisible energy was getting directed to her back, where some light began to glow and extend out. The light shaped itself, and became wings made from green energy.

Seeing this, Metal nodded approvingly. *She's doing it,* he thought.

She knew that she was doing it, and while Jill would be overjoyed, she didn't dare lose her concentration. Now that she knew what emotion drove it, she focused on it intently. Strangely enough, she focused on the idea wanting to help Metal find his purpose. No matter what Metal thought, Jill knew there was something much better in store for him.

That was more than enough to encourage more of the transformation.

Sparkles began to swirl around her and eventually, light began to wrap around her like a cocoon until she was completely encased in a cocoon of light.

Metal could tell that this transformation was less of a spectacle that the transformation he had seen before, but at the same time, it had the sense that it was much more controlled, rather than energy spontaneously working chaotically.

...impressive, he thought, as he watched the transformation. *We've only just begun day 2 of training... and we've made this much progress, already.*

The cocoon of light faded away, revealing that white being aglow. Slowly, Jill opened her eyes, showing that her eyes had changed too; fully green and alien-like. Then she smiled at Metal.

" *...good job.* " Metal said, as he clapped his hands together at this display. " *Now, it's all a question of how long you can maintain this form... so I'd like you to focus on staying in that form, for as long as you can handle it.* "

" *Okay,"* Jill nodded. *"Aside from that, what else are we going to work on?"*

" *Well, I'm not certain.* " Metal shrugged. " *I don't think that sparring within the cave is a good idea, and we can't exit the cave until the storm lets up... so why don't you think of some method of training?* "

Jill looked toward the depths of the cave; having sensed something.

Chaos was standing there a few feet away, holding the white Chaos Emerald up. Jill simply raised her own hand, and the emerald began to radiate with its light as it fluttered out of Chaos' hand and into Jill's. She looked at it, and then back at Chaos questionably.

Metal also glanced at the water creature with a look of his own. *...what does he want now?* he thought.

Chaos nudged his head at the emerald, which made Jill look at it again. *"…do you want me to do something with the emerald?"* she asked.

Chaos nodded.

It wasn't much help playing charades, so Jill stared at the emerald thoughtfully. She stared long and hard, to a point where her own eyes started to glow along with the emerald.

" *He wants me to practice with Chaos Energy,"* Jill said. *"He wants to see how Purity works with Chaos Energy."*

" *...that sounds like something that could come in handy.* " Metal nodded, as he folded his arms. " *Go on; do as he asks of you, Jill.* "

But what does he want me to do with Chaos Energy? Jill wondered in thought. She decided to keep the question to herself as she allowed the Chaos Emerald to float freely in the air above her palms, fixing eyes with it.

She began to see some things in her mind.

"… *I can see another emerald,"* Jill uttered, dazed.

Yes, she saw the cyan colored one that was with Proxy, who sat by a window watching the rain with Brick.

...she's able to locate Chaos Emeralds on her own? Metal thought, as he looked at her with a surprised look. *...that can definitely come in handy...*

"… *So you have three of them in Westopolis, along with the one you have with you,"* Jill hummed, still staring at the emerald. *"I wondered how many you had gotten, Metal…"*

...not bad... Metal thought, as he nodded. " *Well, had to do something to keep me occupied.* " he said with a shrug.

" *As for the last one…"* Jill kept looking at it…

…and then suddenly she recoiled back in shock. *"No way!"*

She saw Callous, Johnny, Bloom and Gloom lying in wait in the jungles of Mystic Ruins. More importantly, she saw that the emerald was in Johnny's steel compartment on his chest.

Callous' eye became suspicious, and looked around. She sensed something…

That was when Jill dropped the emerald, just to keep Callous from figuring out what she sensed.

" *...what's wrong, Jill?* " Metal uttered, as he moved closer to Jill. " *What did you see?* "

"… *Callous, and Johnny are in the Mystic Ruins,"* She whimpered. *"Johnny has the emerald…and they've got those horrible butterfly twins with them…Callous sensed me and I had to get away…"* She took deep breaths to try to calm down.

" *Relax.* " Metal said, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. " *I don't know what Callous is currently planning, but both Tails Doll and*

Calculate will be ready to foil her, in case she does anything to gain an advantage. "

"… *but can Tails Doll withstand two people that can use Corruption?"* Jill asked, turning to Metal uneasily. *"No, make that four; the twins can use it too."*

" *Oh, you might not believe me...* " Metal said, as he chuckled. " *...but aside from me and the E-100 series, Tails Doll is likely the most dangerous of Eggman's creations. It doesn't matter if these people are living or dead; Tails Doll is the kind of creation who builds and thrives on one thing...* fear." The way he put emphasis on the word 'fear' would seem very threatening. " *Besides, isn't Proxy able to fight with Corruption as well?*

"...I guess you have a point," Jill answered, even though it didn't ease her worry.

"Well, there's not much we can do, but to keep preparing you." Metal shrugged, as he folded his arms. *"What else do you suppose you could do by combining Purity and Chaos Energy ?"*

"I'll have to experiment with it to find out," Jill said.

"Right, you go ahead and-" Metal began, when he tensed; he heard something. After a while... *"...oh, great..."*

"Do not move." The dark, monotone, robotic voice called throughout the cave, as some figure stood out in the rain, aiming its arms at Jill and Metal.

Jill knew the voice. *"Omega?"*

Chaos slithered under Jill and Metal and stood between them and Omega, ready to fight if it had to.

"Jillian Condit. Step away from Neo Metal Sonic." Omega uttered out in the rain, as his hands turned into gatling guns, which began turning around, ready to fire.

"...he obviously wants to eliminate me." Metal muttered, as he

closed his eyes. *"Too bad that he came around at this point in time..."*

"Omega, don't!" Jill said. *"You don't understand the situation!"*

"Step away from Neo Metal Sonic." Omega repeated, ignoring Jill's pleas.

"Oh, for crying out..." Metal groaned, as he marched right past Chaos, standing between the water creature and the red robot. *"You want me? Come and get me."*

"CHAOS CONTROL!"

Before Omega even had a chance of firing at Metal, he froze in place; even his gatling guns stopped rotating completely.

Jill held the glowing Chaos Emerald out, implying she had issued the Chaos Control. *"Sorry Omega, but we don't want any more trouble than we can handle,"* she muttered.

"...you know, I could handle that on my own, Jill." Metal said with a sigh, as he raised his arm, pointing it at Omega. *"First, allow me to make a point.* Chaos Control *!"*

At that point, Omega suddenly unfroze, before unleashing a hail of bullets at the Metallix, but they were all repelled by a black shield that appeared around him, also protecting Jill and Chaos from stray bullets. ***"Must eliminate*** Metal Sonic ***!"***

"Yeah, good luck with that," Then, Metal's eyes glowed, as Omega's arms suddenly pointed away from Metal; some blue aura covering them. *"Remind me to thank Ani, for allowing me to copy her data."* Metal said, without taking his eyes off Omega.

"Sorry, I panicked," Jill apologized.

"Eh, it happens." Metal muttered, as he kept looking at Omega. *"Now, are we going to be a good, little robot, and forget what we've*

seen here today?"

"...Jill." Omega uttered. ***"Why are you protecting Metal Sonic?"*** he inquired, as he strived to try and move his arms, but Metal easily held him in check from where he stood.

Well there were a lot of reasons why Jill was siding with Metal, but she can't exactly pour her heart out to another robot. *"Because he's training me to fight Callous,"* she replied. *"Callous is much more dangerous than Metal, Omega..."*

"... Metal Sonic ***is... training you?"*** Omega uttered, as he glared at Metal. ***"...how can you trust him?"***

"Listen, I think you've overstayed your welcome, here." Metal said, as he prepared to snap his fingers. *"Don't take this personally, but I would appreciate it if you kept quiet about this, Omega."*

"...I just know I can trust him Omega," Jill said. *"That's all I can say, so please don't tell anyone about this."*

Omega glared at Jill for a moment, before eventually nodding. ***"...I understand."***

"Great. Have a nice trip, now. Chaos Control *!"* Before Jill could stop the Metallix, he suddenly snapped his fingers, and in that instant, Omega vanished.

Jill found herself looking at Metal now. For some reason, what Omega said reached her. Could she really trust Metal? For all she knew, Metal could really be a good enough actor to be deceiving her with a friendlier appearance. Remembering what she told him about Callous and her, Jill figured out that Metal could just easily kill her and end the two of them, and saw how stupid it was to tell him that.

Then she thought she was crazy for thinking that. She had been with Metal long enough to see a side of him that no one else ever would, and she hadn't forgotten the secret promise she made to find a better purpose for him.

But then again, that was feeling sorry for someone. Was that a good excuse to trust them?

The conflicting thoughts were making it hard to stay in her Holy Form, and her glow almost faded.

No, I pledge loyalty to those who need my help, she reminded herself. *Metal needs my help as much as I need his.*

That was convincing enough to allow her to stay glowing in her Holy Form.

Chaos glanced at Jill curiously with a tilted head.

"There; I've sent Omega to the Chaotix HQ." Metal muttered, as he lowered his arms, before re-entering the cave. *"Hopefully, he'll be silent about this."* Then, he glanced at Jill. "You alright?"

Jill was quiet at first, and then she responded, *"...Metal, I can trust you...right?"* She knew that she would rather be honest with Metal than keep it it, for fear that her doubt could interfere with her training.

"...yes." Metal said, as he gave Jill a nod. *"I'm here as your coach, not as your enemy. Don't forget that."*

"Right," Jill responded as her eyes fell to the ground. What brought her eyes back up was Chaos bringing her the Chaos Emerald that she dropped, encouraging her to train again. She took it, but she just looked at it rather than tried anything with it.

As she did that, Metal folded his arms, watching her closely. *...she'll win, no doubt.* he thought. *But... if the unthinkable happens, and she doesn't make it, I'll have to resort to plan B... I only hope that this body can handle that.*

"Alright," Jill said with a deep breath. *"Let's try this again."*

"So, all set?" Hunter asked the group. He couldn't really believe that they were all going to do this.

"You'd better believe it!" King said with a huge grin, as he cracked his knuckles. "We'll pound them!"

"Let's not get too trigger-happy, King..." Wiper muttered. "Even though you're supposed to charge into battle, I'd appreciate it if you didn't kill too many."

"Kekekeke... why is that, Wiper?" Ripper mused.

"Because I don't think the GUN Commander would be too thrilled at most of GUN's forces being decimated." Wiper retorted.

"...wait. Miser isn't here yet." Queen noted.

"She told me that she was going to borrow something from Newt..." Sage chimed in, as she rubbed her chin in thought. "Wonder what that could be, though..."

"Who knows," Hunter said, shrugging.

"Well, she'll be here soon, in any case..." Sage noted, as she glanced at a doorway.

Soon enough, Miser appeared in that doorway, but she was not only carrying her own railgun, but also Newt's Stinger. "I figured I could be a bit more equipped, for once." she said with a slight smile.

"Alright, so we're all set, right?" King said, as he glanced at his comrades.

"Count on it! Kekekekeke!" Ripper cackled.

"Ready!" Wiper, Queen and Miser said in tandem.

"All clear, King." Sage said in a more casual tone.

"Let's haul out and rescue the Commander," Hunter said, nodding.

"Right! Let's go!" King said, as he immediately opened the entrance door, before heading out of the HQ. "To Station Square!" he said, as the agents ran out of the building.

"I don't think we'll be allowed on a train, but I have an alternate way of transport ready for us!" Sage said, as suddenly, all seven of them were lifted off the ground, with Sage mentally carrying all of them. "This should make it much simpler to get there!"

"Good thing I'm not afraid of heights," Hunter remarked. Then he glanced back at the HQ which was shrinking from view, hoping that Ani would be alright in their care while he was gone.

"Don't worry." Sage said to Hunter, with a slight tap on his back. "She'll be fine."

"How long do you anticipate it will take for us to get there, Sage?" Queen asked.

"Not too long; the longest it'll take us would be two hours." Sage replied.

Boomer watched them disappear from her window, turning greener than she was with envy. "I wish I could go with them," she huffed crossly.

"I do, too..." Newt muttered, as he watched them leave along with Boomer. "...but I guess they're just lookin' out for us, y'know?"

"Yeah, but even then, that wouldn't have stopped me," Boomer replied.

"I don't doubt that for a minute Boomer," Charmy said, laughing in the background.

Newt couldn't help but chuckle a bit as well, before he looked back out the window. "Well, looks like it'll be a whole lot emptier around here for a while..." he muttered... just as something suddenly appeared outside. "Eh?"

As it turned out, it was Omega, who was currently looking at his arms, moving them about a bit.

Boomer stared in awe. "Did he just...appear out of nowhere?"

Charmy looked over their shoulders. "Ah, Omega. I wondered where

he went. Want to fetch him Boomer?"

"No way Jose!" Boomer screamed, backing away with her hands waving back and forth. "You think I'm going out to him after my little lesson? Uh-uh!"

Charmy laughed. He was merely teasing her, and her reaction was priceless. "Relax," he chuckled, "I'll go get him." Boomer eased up once Charmy left the room and down the hall.

Newt held in his laughter, as he placed a hand on Boomer's shoulder. "Don't fret, you hear?" he said with a smile.

Boomer let out a frustrated sigh, "Yeah, okay."

"That's good." Newt said, without losing his smile.

Outside, Omega slowly opened and closed his hands repeatedly, whilst looking at them. *...what is* Metal Sonic *planning?* he thought.

"Well, hi there Omega."

Hearing that voice, Omega looked away from his arms, to the source of the voice. ***"...Charmy the*** Bee ***."*** he said bluntly.

"Right you are Omega," Charmy said, walking up to the giant robot. "Where were you anyway? You missed a lot of action going on here."

"...I've been wandering about." Omega uttered. ***"You wouldn't mind informing me of what it is I've missed?"***

"Not at all..." Charmy replied. "Come along." He walked quickly back into the HQ just so he wouldn't get soaked in the rain, and he wanted to make sure that Omega wouldn't rust out here.

Nodding, Omega followed the bee into the HQ, all while thinking of his confrontation against Metal, even if it was brief. *...he can't really be working with Jill... can he?* the robot thought.

Chapter 44

CHAPTER FOURTY-FOUR

"Let's go!" exclaimed Striker, running down the hall.

"Wait up, Striker!" Jack laughed, as he ran after Striker. "Milo, hurry up! Whisker's waiting outside for us!"

Milo didn't want to go outside. "...on second thought, guys," he said. "Is it okay if I stay inside?"

"What's the matter Milo?" Rudy asked wonderingly.

"...I don't want to get sick," Milo replied, "it's still raining." This was only half-truth; while he didn't want to get sick, yes, he REALLY didn't want to go outside. That bad feeling was knocking his stomach like a punching bag.

Stopping, Jack glanced at Milo. "Aaw... well, if you feel like changing your mind, just tell us!" he said in a friendly tone, despite being a bit disappointed that Milo wouldn't join them. "See you, then!" he said with a wave, before hurrying down the hall again.

Milo watched as Striker and Milo took off after Jack down the hall toward that elevator. He had to turn away, and for unknown reasons, he felt guilt. So much guilt, in fact, that he wanted to cry. "What's wrong with me?" he muttered shakily, walking to his room.

Meanwhile, once the elevator reached the foot of the trunk, the boys ventured outside in the pouring rain.

Rudy took a large intake of a breath before, "WHISKER!"

"YAAAAAAR!" They'd hear someone else call, as they'd see Whisker out in the rain. "Thar be ye! I`ve been waitin' fer ya! Let`s go, already!"

"Yeah, let's go!" Jack said happily, as he ran out to Whisker. "Come

on, let's show Whisker the mine cart, Striker!"

"Yeah!" Striker exclaimed, taking off running ahead of the others.

Meanwhile, Bloom and Gloom were stationed nearby, and having seen the kids, mainly Jack, they smirked. Shortly, they flew away and to where Callous and Johnny were hiding out under the rain. "They're outside," Bloom giggled evilly. "Jack is with them."

"Good," Callous said. "Now, how do you intend we approach this Johnny?"

"Obviously, we can't let the others know that I switch out with Jack, so we need to get them separated, somehow..." Johnny muttered, as he rubbed his chin. "Hopefully, so Jack's completely on his own..."

"So, what be th' jungle like?" Whisker inquired, as the group was running after Striker. "Any hidden bountiful booty I ortin' ta know about? Yar har har har!"

"I don't know; we haven't really looked around that much!" Jack laughed. "Hey, Striker!" he called. "Do you think there's any treasure around here?"

"I don't know, but a treasure hunt sounds like an awesome idea!" Striker laughed.

"Yeah, we could be like Captain Whisker's pirate crew!" Rudy laughed along with Striker.

"That`s a great idee!" Whisker laughed, as he pointed ahead of them. "Alright, mateys, let`s search fer that booty!"

"Aye, aye!" Jack laughed, as he ran ahead of the group. "I can be look-out!"

"Me and Rudy will start looking for anything that might lead to a treasure!" Striker said, as the two of them split in completely opposite directions.

Bloom and Gloom having checked on the kids again, returned back

to Callous and Johnny to report.

"A pirate treasure hunt hm?" Callous mused, rubbing her chin. "Sounds fun."

"Then they've all split up?" Johnny noted, as he rubbed his hands together. "Time to go to work, I assume." he said, before glancing at Callous. "Just be ready to grab him when he's distracted." Then, he headed off into the woods.

Callous looked to Bloom and Gloom. "Watch from above and make sure the others aren't nearby when its time."

With a salute, the two of them took off into the air, while Callous wormed her way in hiding in the direction Jack was presumed to be.

Meanwhile, Jack was standing near the bottom of a cliff, which he was looking up at. "If there's treasure around here, it has to be there!" he laughed, as he rubbed his hands together, before beginning to scale the cliff; thankfully, it wasn't too large, so he'd get up without any problems.

Callous finally made it nearby him, watching him with a smirk. *There he is,* she thought. *And he doesn't suspect a thing.*

Eventually, Jack got to the top of the cliff, where he saw something that really got his attention; the mouth of a cave. "...woah." he uttered, as he approached the cave. "This... is so COOL! There's bound to be treasure in there!" he said, as he began walking into the cave, unaware of someone climbing up after him...

Callous remained as close as she could without getting caught by Jack, and once he wandered into the cave, her smirk grew. *Now he's as vulnerable as ever,* she thought in a purely evil way.

"Hrm... it's pretty dark in here..." Jack muttered, as he eventually stopped in the cave, rubbing his chin. "I'm not gonna find any treasure if I can't see my own hands..." Then, he smiled. "I know! I'll just go to the clubhouse and borrow a flashlight from Brick!" Then, he turned around. "Then I can get the others to-" At that point, he stopped, as someone was standing by the cave entrance; someone

he was shocked to see who was. "...huh?"

"You're Jack, huh?" this person said, as it turned out to be Johnny, who smirked, as he folded his arms. "Pleased to meet you. Name's Johnny."

"...Johnny?" Jack uttered, as he tilted his head. "...why do you look like me?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Johnny said with a smug grin. "But I'll ask you another thing... does the name Leoniel ring a bell to you?"

Where's he going with this? Callous wondered, remaining in hiding.

Hearing that name, Jack reeled back in surprise. "...how'd you know my surname?" he uttered.

"It's your surname, huh?" Johnny said with a smirk. "Where'd you get that kind of name?"

"Uh..." Jack gulped. Honestly, this Johnny character seemed to know just a bit too much about him. "It... it's my mom's surname. She told me not to use it, though; she doesn't like the name."

"Really?" Then, Johnny grinned. "And what is your mother's name?"

"...her name?" Jack uttered, as he looked around, as if to find a way to get away from Johnny. "...her name's Vanessa..."

"Vanessa?" At that point, Johnny broke out in laughter. "What a coincidence! That's the name of my older sister!"

So the plot thickens, Callous thought, walking out of hiding. *Who knew Johnny was the kid's uncle?*

Hearing that, Jack actually fell to the ground in utter shock, a look of genuine fear on his face. "...no way! Mom always told me that she didn't have any siblings!"

"Oh, she lied to you about me, huh?" Johnny chuckled, as he pressed his fingers against his temples. "But what can you do... so,

you're 17, huh? I was around that age before I died."

"You died?" Jack uttered, as he tried crawling further into the cave, still looking at Johnny in shock. "But why are you standing right there, then?"

"I think that's another story for another time. For now..." At that point, Johnny grinned evily. "Callous, take him away."

Hearing that name, Jack actually stopped moving away. "...C-Callous?"

Jack felt his arm grabbed, and Callous was right there next to him; taking care to yank the harmonica in his pocket away from his capable use. "You and me are going to go on a little field trip, Jack," Callous cackled.

"H-hey, wait!" Jack pleaded, as he tried reaching for his harmonica, but to no avail. "Wh-why are you doing this?"

"Hey, Jack." Johnny said, as he ran a finger across his scar, which left a slight trail of black smog, before the scar seemed to vanish. "I just made up a nursery rhyme. Care to listen?"

At this point, Jack was growing panicked, as he tried getting out of Callous' grip. "N-no! Let me go!"

"It goes like this; Jack and Jill went up the hill..." Johnny began, as he placed a hand on the steel compartment on his chest, and as black smog amassed around it, it seemed like it vanished as well. "...and then, Callous and Johnny went in for the kill."

Callous could care less for the cheesy nursery rhyme Johnny came up with, but you didn't need much to scare a childish mind, so Callous chuckled at Jack's fear. "Hold on tight, squirt," she said, just as she and Jack began to sink within the darkness in the ground.

"N-no, wait!" Jack yelled, as he desperately tried getting out of the dark. "Someone! Help me!"

"Sorry to break it to you, but no one's going to help you, Jack." Johnny chuckled. "Well... take care." Then, as he turned around, he

broke into a manical laughter, as he began climbing down the cliff again.

"No... no... HEEEEEEELP!" Jack cried, but it was no use, as he and Callous both sank into the dark, leaving no trace of the lion.

Bloom and Gloom had come to watch, and once they saw Johnny coming out and Callous taking Jack into the dark, they exchanged a high-five. "Mission accomplished!" they both chanted.

Striker's head whirled back. He thought he heard something from where he was.

It sounded like Jack calling for help.

"...Jack?" Striker called, running in the direction of where he heard it.

Okay... As he finished climbing down the cliff, Johnny rubbed his temples. *I need to figure out how he was acting. If I act out of character, they'll notice.* he thought, as he took a deep breath. He seemed kind of childish... I can handle something like that.

"Jack!" Striker called, running now.

Bloom and Gloom watched from above to see Striker heading towards Johnny. "Lets see how he does," Bloom murmured.

"Hm?" Blinking, Johnny glanced behind him, before smiling in a friendly manner. "Oh, there you are! You should've seen it; there was this cave, and I think there could have been treasure in it!"

"Really?" Striker said excitedly, obviously buying Johnny's disguise. "Did you go in there and find any Jack?"

"Well, that's the thing..." Johnny began, as he scratched the back of his head. "The cave was really dark, and I thought we could get a flashlight back at the clubhouse! Then we could all go in the cave and look together!" *Wow, this is a whole lot simpler than I thought!* he thought.

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Striker said. Then he looked up at the rain. "Then again, I'm tired of standing out in the rain," he muttered.

"Maybe we should head back inside."

"Yeah, maybe we should..." Johnny muttered, as he looked up. "But I really wanted to look through the cave... oh, well. Lead the way!" he said, as he pointed ahead of them.

"Sure thing!" Striker said, strutting onward. "I'm glad that you're okay Jack. I thought I heard you cry for help."

"You did?" Johnny said in a surprised tone. "Nah, you must have been hearing things!" he said, laughing. *Wow, this kid is a sap! I do wonder how Callous is treating little Jack right now...* he thought.

"Don't worry little Jack," Callous chuckled, as she walked around Jack who was lying on the floor of the dark, tied up with strands of Corruption energy. "I won't put a scratch on you unless its absolutely necessary."

Jack looked absolutely horrified, as he tried getting out from the bonds. "Why... why are you doing this?" he uttered in a frightened tone, as he tried glancing at Callous.

"Because I HATE Jill," Callous said, reaching down and bringing up Jack's chin to see her, "and I'm positively evil. That a good enough reason?"

"...no, it's a stupid reason!" Jack said, as he struggled to get out even more. "Jill hasn't done anything to you! Just because you're evil... doesn't mean that you can be a bully!"

"Actually, that's what being evil is all about Jack," Callous laughed, throwing Jack back down. "It's about being a bully!"

Gritting his teeth, Jack looked away from Callous. "...but why do you hate her, anyway? Jill's a nice person, you know!"

"She has something that's supposed to be mine," Callous hissed at him. "That stupid soul we share. Everyone thinks its her soul, but I really think that its mine!"

"...you share a soul?" Jack uttered, as he looked at Callous. "...can't you just share it? You know, like friends?"

"No, we can't!" Callous screamed in Jack's face.

As she screamed, Jack winced in fear, as he looked at her with a frightened look. "Wh-why not?" he uttered.

"Because I don't want to share it," Callous said. "I want it all for myself."

"...but that's kind of dumb." Jack said. "I mean... doing mean things like that, just because you want something for yourself?" Then, he closed his eyes. "Mom always told me that people who do things just for their own gain won't get far in life."

"Well I wouldn't care what you Mom thinks," Callous snorted. "And maybe you'd do your best to be quiet or I might hurt you."

"But what are you and that Johnny-guy planning, anyway?" Jack asked, as he glanced up at Callous. "He did some weird things to look just like me, for some reason..."

Callous grew an evil smirk. "Why, he's going to pretend to you," she sneered. "And then when it's the right time, your Uncle Johnny is going to take your friends one by one..."

"He's not gonna get away with it!" Jack said, as he looked away from Callous. "And he's no uncle of mine, either!"

"Well then, I guess I won't get away with this either," Callous laughed, opening her hand to release a ball of suspended Corruption energy. Then she walked menacingly toward Jack. "How'd you like to know what Corruption feels like, Jack?"

Hearing that made Jack quickly look up at Callous, as he tried getting out of the bonds. "G-get away!" he said, as he gritted his teeth, trying desperately to get away.

Callous just kept laughing as she was about to send the energy upon him...

...but she stopped. In fact, she stopped laughing and her smile turned into a look of fear, as the Corruption disappeared from her palm.

Having closed his eyes while believing that he would be attacked, Jack slowly opened them when he felt nothing. "...eh?" he uttered, as he looked up at Callous.

Callous looked off in a direction past Jack, stepping away in fright. "...No, no, it's impossible!" she said, shaking her head. "You shouldn't be here! You'd have no way of getting here!"

"How dare you threaten his life?" spoke a woman's voice in a harsh tone towards her. Walking past Jack was Goddess, who was radiating with a bright, pure glow.

"...huh?" Jack uttered, as he had to close his eyes due to the bright light Goddess was radiating. "Who... who are you?" he uttered.

Goddess didn't answer his question. She was shooting a deathly glare at Callous, who backed away cowardly to the light.

"But the dark would affect you!" Callous yelled. "Why isn't it?"

"You have no right to speak to me like that," Goddess growled, which made Callous flinch. "You might get away with some cheap strategy, but you went too far." Goddess turned and with a motion of her hands, used Purity to cut the Corruption bonds that held Jack. "And what does it matter that the dark has no effect on me?"

Then Goddess helped Jack up to his feet, looking upon him with worry. "Are you alright, child?"

"...y-yeah..." Jack nodded, before he looked at Callous. "...but she took my harmonica..."

Goddess looked back at Callous sternly, causing her to whip out the harmonica and hold it out. "Here it is," she whimpered.

"Hmph," Goddess grunted, coming over and taking it from her.

Unfortunately, the instant she took the harmonica from her, Callous made a quick move jabbing her hand into Goddess' middle, stabbing her with Corruption.

Needless to say, Goddess was stunned and choked on the pain

Callous ensued, dropping Jack's harmonica as her glow faded.

"Now that I got you right where I want you," Callous said, growing a cackle. "I'm not letting you go."

"H-HEY!" Seeing that stunned Jack, but not enough to keep him from noticing his harmonica. "...let her go!" In that instant, he dove down, grabbed the harmonica, and switched the microphone on. Then, he began playing it furiously, as he glared up at Callous, emitting powerful shock waves from the small instrument.

It was bad enough the shock waves hurt her ears, but Callous was actually propelled away, leaving Goddess to collapse.

"Take THAT, you bully!" Jack said, as he quickly looked at Goddess, before grabbing her. "H-hey, are you alright?"

Goddess didn't answer while she cringed in pain. But she saw Callous getting back up and running after them. Therefore, Goddess held out her hand, releasing a blinding flash that stopped Callous in her tracks.

While Callous cried out in her blind agony, Goddess grabbed Jack and the two of them warped away in a bright flash.

Goddess and Jack then reappeared somewhere else, but unfortunately it wasn't the jungles of Mystic Ruins. It was in the middle of the woods, with the rain still pouring. Goddess finally collapsed again on the ground weakly, having gotten Jack to safety.

"H-hey!" As she collapsed, Jack placed his hands on her, as he had a worried look on his face. "Come on, miss, you've got to stand up!"

"...I can't," Goddess tried to say. "...Callous hurt me really bad..."

"D-don't worry!" Jack said, as he looked around. "I... I can get you to the clubhouse!" At that point, however, he realized that he wasn't in the jungle. "...where is this place?" he uttered, as he glanced down at Goddess.

Goddess looked around. She cursed herself that she hadn't gotten Jack back to Mystic Ruins, but she knew where they were. "...If you

search long and hard, you will find a cave," Goddess said. "My daughter is in that cave. She may be able to help." She didn't want to meet Jill like this; not at all.

"Your daughter?" Jack uttered, as he quickly grabbed Goddess' arm, before hoisting it over his shoulder, before he helped her up, supporting her with his own body. "Don't worry... I'll get to that cave, and then we can help you out!"

All Goddess could do was nod, as the two of them ambled away through the rain.

Meanwhile, not too far away in a cave...

"You know Metal," Jill suddenly said. *"I just thought of something. The Chaos Emeralds aught to be connected to the Master Emerald . Something happened to the Master Emerald, yet, the Chaos Emeralds weren't affected..."* Then she looked at the metallix. *"Why do you suppose that is?"*

"...I have a theory." Metal shrugged, as he folded his arms. *"Chaos. After all, we saw that he escaped from the Master Emerald ; maybe him being out here protects the Chaos Emeralds ."*

"That's a good theory," Jill said, though she wished that Chaos was here to confirm that. The water creature had gone back deeper into the caves, possibly to his chambers.

"Well, good or not, it's still only a theory." Metal noted. *"We can't base our facts on nothing but speculations. What we need is solid evidence."*

Jill suddenly glanced outside the mouth of the cave through the rain. After a minute, she dropped the emerald in horror. She felt a presence coming toward them, but it was weakening, and it was a presence she hadn't felt in a long time.

The presence of Purity.

"...what is it?" Metal uttered, just as his eyes widened. *... Purity ?* he thought, as he looked around. *No way... it couldn't possibly be...*

"Hello?" they would hear a familiar voice call. "Is there anyone there? Someone's hurt over here!"

"Oh my God," Jill whispered behind her hands. *"That's Jack..."* And someone was hurt?

Jill felt so much dread that moment.

"...we're over here!" Metal suddenly called. *"Can you hear me? Follow the sound of my voice, and you'll find shelter!"*

"...okay!" they heard Jack call back, and after a while, they would see Jack appearing out from the woods, carrying Goddess over his shoulder. "...Jill? Metal Sonic?"

"...Goddess." Metal uttered.

Jill was speechless. It took her a minute to recalibrate, before she looked at Goddess and her Corruption stab wound. *"...M-mom?"*

Goddess looked up at Jill, and smiled before she fell on the ground again.

"MOM!" Jill cried, rushing to Goddess.

"Wha- she's *your* mother, Jill?" Jack uttered, as he knelt by Goddess, trying to get her up. "Come on... get up; you can get help, now!"

"...what..." Metal uttered, as he actually walked out after Jill, looking at Goddess in utter surprise.

No matter how much Jill shook Goddess, she didn't wake up; she had fainted due to how weary she was, having used the last of her strength to save Jack. *"Jack, what happened?"* Jill asked, turning to the lion in shock. *"How'd you get here? Who did this to my mother?"*

It was amazing she was still in her Holy Form. Then again, her emotions were becoming unstable.

"It..." Jack uttered, as he closed his eyes. "...it was Callous. She and this guy called Johnny... they took me, and Callous was gonna hurt me... but she came and helped me... but Callous stabbed her with Corruption, so I blew her away... and then she got us out, but now..."

"I think we have more important matters on our hands right now," Metal said, as he stood over Jill. *"Jill, can you help her?"*

Jill coated her hands with Purity to the max, applying her hands to the stab-wound hurriedly. This was the hardest wound to treat, because there was a very heavy amount of Corruption working on Goddess, and it was starting to hurt Jill too much as she tried to heal it. She continued to try, but she felt so much pain in this one.

Callous had given her all into this one.

Jill yanked her hands away with a cry. *"I can't do it; there's just too much of it!"*

"You mean she's going to..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Goddess in horror.

"...no. Jill, try again." Metal uttered, as he knelt down by Goddess, holding his own hands over her. *"I wanted to save this... but now seems like a good opportunity to try it."* As he spoke, his own arms began giving off a green glow, as Jill would find that energy familiar. *"Help me out, here; I don't know how long I can keep this up."*

Jill had completely forgotten that Metal could copy abilities of others, and was baffled that he was using copied data from her.

But she forced herself to try again, wrapping Purity around her hands and putting them on the stab wound again. While the pain took its toll, Jill kept fighting it while she tried to heal it; as did Metal, whose arms were completely coated by Purity. One could see the strain put on the machine whilst he tried healing the wound together with Jill.

Watching this, Jack was utterly awestruck, as he watched the two cooperate like that.

It was working; the Corruption was shrinking away due to both

Metal's and Jill's efforts, but there was still much had to be healed. *Please,* Jill pleaded in her mind. *Please please PLEASE let this work!*

Goddess' eyes popped open abruptly and she let out a pained gasp.

"She's awake!" Jack yelped.

"Don't stop yet! Keep it up!" Metal said, as he looked down at Goddess, still applying Purity to the wound.

Goddess grit her teeth while this went on, until the wound was finally healed. Jill immediately pulled her hands away, seeing dark and heavy markings on her hands; familiar markings.

Not only that, but the same markings were visible on Goddess' middle once the wound had been healed.

However, that wasn't all; even on Metal's hands, the same markings appeared, making Metal look at his own hands in surprise.

"...is..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Goddess. "...is she alright?"

Goddess let out a deep breath of relief, but she was still very weak. She remained lying there silently, turning away from them in shame.

"...Mom?" Jill spoke with concern. Unfortunately at that point, Jill's glow faded and she changed back into a ewe, but she ignored this. She merely stared at her mother who refused to respond to her.

"... Goddess ," Metal uttered, as he looked down at her. *"Why aren't you saying anything?"*

Goddess sat up, and then rose to her feet with her back turned to the three of them, while they rose to their feet as well. A longer silence went on, before Goddess started walking away.

"Mom!" Jill cried, making her mother stop.

Goddess' head hung low in overwhelming guilt. "...you have your duties, and I have mine," she muttered. In a blink again, Goddess was gone after having said those words.

Jill choked on grief. Those words had broken her heart.

"...Jill?" Jack uttered, as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are... you alright?"

Goddess... Metal thought, as he had watched her leave, before folding his arms. *...why leave your daughter on her own like that, with nothing to say but that? Is it because you're a spirit?*

Jill finally managed to swallow her feelings down. "...I'm okay," she said with a shaky voice, looking at Jack. "I'm just glad that you're okay, Jack."

"...thanks..." Jack said with a slight smile, before it suddenly dropped. "Oh, shoot! I forgot! Johnny's still on the loose!"

"Johnny?" Hearing that name made Metal glance at Jack. *"What is he doing?"*

"Callous told me that Johnny was going to act like me, and pick off the guys at the clubhouse!" Then, he looked at Jill. "We've got to go back there! They could be in danger!"

Jill was scared hearing that. She knew that Callous and Johnny were planning to do something in the Mystic Ruins, and now that she found out what the plan was, she was worried for her friends' welfare.

But she couldn't overreact.

"Metal," she said, turning to him. "Its up to you. What do you want to do?"

"..." Metal glanced at Jill, before he closed his eyes. *"...you'll stay here and keep training, Jill."* Then, he walked towards Jack. *"I'll take him to the clubhouse, and clean up."*

"Wait, wait..." Jack uttered, as he looked from Metal to Jill. "...why are you with Metal Sonic, anyway, Jill?"

"Metal's helping me train, because in 5 days, I'm going to fight Callous," Jill answered Jack.

"You're gonna fight her?" Jack uttered, as he looked at Metal in surprise."And you're helping Jill out?"

"Look, weren't we going to stop Johnny from causing mayhem?" Metal said, before grabbing Jack. *"Be back in a bit, Jill."* Then, the two of them suddenly disappeared.

Once they were gone, Jill returned back to the cave. For a minute, she just stood there quietly. Within, those feelings of grief arose again from what happened earlier, and she let it out in sobs, now that she was alone and no one was watching.

Chapter 45

CHAPTER FOURTY-FIVE

Brick was still sitting in the room with Proxy when Whisker and the kids, (and Johnny) entered in. "Hey guys, how was it?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Eh, 't be a bust." Whisker said with a shrug. "We didna find any sort o' booty."

"Too bad; I think there could have been some in that cave I found..." Johnny said, as he gave out a sigh.

"Well, better luck next time, I suppose." Proxy said, as he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Maybe once the rain's gone, you guys can go back out there," Brick suggested.

"Hi Milo!" Rudy suddenly said, spotting the little lion cub walking into the room.

"Hi guys," Milo muttered. "How did the exploration..." He trailed off. That bad feeling came back, and it was as strong as ever. His eyes fell on Johnny, and instantly knew that something was wrong.

That wasn't Jack.

"Milo, what's wrong?" Striker asked, oblivious to the fact that Milo was staring at Johnny.

Milo took a few steps back fearfully, continuing to stare timidly at Johnny.

Blinking, Johnny glanced at Milo, before smiling. "Hey, Milo! What's up?" he said, before he tilted his head. "What's wrong? Do I have something on my face?"

At that point, however, Proxy suddenly tensed. "...someone just

warped outside the house." he said. "With Chaos Control."

Brick stood up. "I have a bad feeling...Proxy, Whisker, check outside! I'll stay here with the kids!"

"Alright!" Whisker said, as he cracked his knuckles. "I'll-"

"No... he's right outside." Proxy said, as he closed his eyes. "You all stay here; I'll go and check." Then, he suddenly warped away.

"...who do you think it could be?" Johnny mused, as he glanced at Brick.

"Well, the way I see it, the only means of warping is Chaos Control," Brick began to explain. "Chaos Control can only be done by three people that I know. One's Shadow, and he's gone. The other's Brownie, and she's busy with her training." To the conclusion, Brick looked grave. "The only possibility left is Metal Sonic."

"What?" shouted Rudy. "But what would he want here?"

"Who knows," Brick replied.

Milo continued to look shakily at Johnny. "...w-who are you?" he demanded, stealing everyone's attention immediately.

"Milo, what are you talking about?" Striker asked strangely. "That's Jack! You know Jack!"

Milo shook his head, finally saying what he wanted to. "That's not Jack."

Blinking, Johnny looked at Milo with a surprised look. "...Milo, stop being silly!" he said with a mild laugh. "Of course I'm Jack! I can't be anyone but me, right?"

"No. You're wrong."

At that point, without any warning whatsoever, three people suddenly warped into view before their eyes. One of them was Proxy, who was looking very surprised. The second of them was Metal Sonic, who had his arms folded, glaring at Johnny.

And the third one was Jack.

"Jack!" Milo was grateful that he saw him safe and sound, and he ran to the real Jack, clinging to him dearly.

Needless to say, everyone else was shocked. Seeing Milo with Jack, Striker and Rudy distanced themselves away from Johnny.

"Metal, what are you doing here?" Brick asked. "And if that's Jack, then who's he?" he directed a point at Johnny.

"...no, wait, I'm really Jack!" Johnny said, as he looked at everyone. "H-hey, come on, this isn't fun, guys!"

"The jig is up." Metal said, as he cracked his neck. *"Why don't you crawl back into the hole you were dragged out of?"*

"...wait!" Johnny said, as he suddenly pointed at Jack. "He came with Metal, didn't he? Maybe he's some robot-thing that-"

"Would the fake Jack have this?" Jack said, as he walked past Metal, before suddenly pulling out his harmonica, shoving it in Johnny's face. "Now get out, and leave my friends alone, Johnny!"

Striker and Rudy looked at Milo again. Milo was positive who was who, and since he wasn't afraid of the Jack that he stood by, they also joined Jack, glaring at Johnny. "We don't know who you are!" Striker said. "But it sounds like you don't belong here!"

Brick, meanwhile, looked at Metal. If Metal was helping Jill, then maybe he ought to trust the judgment of the metallix. After all, it seemed like the kids had a good idea. "Is your name really Johnny?" he growled.

"..." However, Johnny was silent, as he was looking down at the ground. "...goddamn... and here I thought that Callous would take care of you..." At that point, Johnny suddenly shot his arm out, grabbing hold of Jack's throat.

"Jack!" Proxy called, as he reeled his hand back, ready to punch Johnny. "You son of a-" At that point, he threw the punch.

However, upon impact, it didn't even make Johnny flinch, as he kept glaring at Jack, who was grasping at the arm holding his neck, trying to get loose. "Looks like I've got to take care of this on my own..." Then, Johnny's free arm suddenly began changing form, as his hand started to look like some form of bio-organic blade, complete with black ooze seeping from it.

Seeing that, Proxy gritted his teeth. "Corruption!"

"If Vanessa ever comes around..." Johnny uttered, as he pulled his arm back, ready to impale Jack. "...tell her that she is an utter disgrace to the Leoniel name!" At that point, he thrust the bladed arm forward.

At that point, Jack fell to the floor, but not because he had been wounded by Johnny; in fact, the attack never even hit Jack.

It hit Metal.

The room was silent, watching what had happened in awestruck.

Did Metal just... Brick just couldn't comprehend it.

"...hn?" Johnny was shocked as well, as Metal had yanked Jack out of Johnny's grip, allowing the blade to pierce through his body instead. "You..."

"...what? That's all you have?" Metal scoffed, before he broke out into laughter, as his right hand began glowing a bright green. *"Here's some real power!"* Then, before Johnny could hope to avoid it, the Metallix furiously swung his arm at the lion, hitting him squarely in the face with a right hook, which actually sent the lion crashing out a nearby window, landing on the ground with a heavy thud.

At that point, they'd hear Johnny yell out in pain, as he held his face, writhing on the ground. "Goddamn it, it burns! What the hell did you do?"

"...that should take care of that." Metal scoffed, before he looked down at Jack. *"You alright?"*

"...y-yeah..." Jack nodded, as he looked up at Metal in awe. "...that... was... AWESOME!" At that point, Jack bounced back on his feet, holding his hands clenched together as he looked at Metal with an excited look. "You just punched Johnny through a window, and it was AWESOME!"

"...Metal?" Milo muttered, looking up at the Metallix curiously. "...why did you come here?"

"...to ensure that no foul play is committed." Metal replied, as he glanced back down at Johnny, who was starting to calm down, as he still held his face. *"...you stay there; I'll deal with him."* At that point, the Metallix leapt out the window, landing on the ground, eyes locked on Johnny.

"...kkh..." Grunting, Johnny glared at Metal. "Bastard... how did you manage to hurt me? This Corruption-stuff wasn't supposed to make me feel like acid was thrown on me!"

"Hrm... I suppose you weren't told about Corruption's counterpart?" Metal chuckled, as his arms began glowing green again. *"Purity. Truly a strange power, isn't it?"*

"Purity?" Brick repeated, watching the scene from the window. *He must've copied Brownie's data,* he guessed in thought.

"...damn it..." Johnny grunted, as he got on his feet, but before he could do that, Metal suddenly grabbed him by his throat with the arm bound by Purity, before pinning him down. "AGH!"

"If you ever see Callous when Jillian kills her, let her know one thing..." Metal began, as he raised his other hand, Purity quickly covering that arm. *"...let her know that she cannot take my place. Not now, not ever."*

There he goes, saying that again, Brick thought, watching in anticipation to see what Metal would do to Johnny.

But in the nick of time, darkness appeared around the ground Johnny was on, and a hand grabbed the lion, dragging him down and disappearing.

"Phew... perfect timing!" Johnny managed to say before he vanished.

"...crap." Metal uttered, as he stood up, watching where Johnny had disappeared to. *"...oh, well. I'll deal with him later."* he shrugged.

Brick growled seeing that, because that was such a cheap trick. Nevertheless, Brick turned around to Jack. "You okay bud?" he asked. "They didn't do anything bad to you, did they?"

"No..." Jack nodded, as he scratched his head. "Callous tried doing something to me, but she didn't get the chance; someone came to help me, and then I blew Callous away with my harmonica!"

"You did that?" Proxy uttered, as he smirked. "Too bad I couldn't see it."

At that point, Tails Doll fluttered into the room, as he glanced down at Metal Sonic. " *...hey, Big Bro!"* he called, as he waved.

At that point, Metal looked up at the clubhouse again, though when he did that, Tails Doll suddenly stiffened, as his gem began glowing brightly.

"What's going on now?" Striker wondered, watching Tails Doll curiously.

Soon, the glow disappeared from the gem, as Tails Doll slouched over. *"...is there anything else you want me to do, Metal Sonic ?"* he uttered, in a much darker voice.

"No, that'll be it," Metal noted, as he folded his arms. *"See you around."* Then, he suddenly warped away.

"...so, what happened?" Tails Doll said in his normal voice, as he looked at the group.

Tails Doll got strange looks for what just happened.

"...uh, someone was pretending to be Jack," Brick spoke. "And Metal came to take care of the guy."

"What just happened to you?" Rudy asked the plushie.

"Something happened to me?" Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"...so Big Bro got here to stop some mean Jack look-a-like?"*

"Yeah, pretty much." Jack said with a nod.

"Really..." Tails Doll nodded, before clapping his hands together. *"So can we play a game now?"*

"...I think we all need to rest for now, rather than playing games..." Proxy noted, as he folded his arms.

"In fact, now we aught to be careful going outside on our own," Brick added, looking outside. Then he turned to Jack. "Jack, who was it that rescued you?"

"Um..." Jack hummed, as he scratched his chin, before snapping his fingers. "Oh, yeah! It was..." He stopped himself, as he held his chin. *...should I tell them that...* he thought.

"Jack?" Proxy said, as he looked at Jack. "Who was it?"

"...a woman. I think her name was Goddess..." Jack replied, as he scratched his head.

"Goddess huh?" Brick said. "Well, whoever she is, I'm thankful to her for saving you."

"Well, that was a big flop!" grumbled Callous. She was still blinded a good deal, and the only way she was able to snatch Johnny under was because she could sense his presence of Corruption. Right now, she wasn't even sure if she was looking at him.

And she wasn't; she was looking directly away from him. "Ugh, tell me about it." Johnny muttered, as he folded his arms. "If Metal Sonic

hadn't shown up, I could've killed some of them, at least..."

"If only that damn woman didn't show up," Callous growled, clenching her fists.

"...who?" Johnny inquired, as he rubbed his face with a groan; it still stung a bit after Metal had punched him.

"I had the little brat cornered and this woman came out of nowhere and rescued him," Callous said, trying to turn to where she heard Johnny's voice. "She blinded me, and the kid knocked me back with that stupid harmonica."

"Tsch... damn kid." Johnny muttered, as he folded his arms. "And damn machine, too. If Metal Sonic hadn't been there, Jack would be dead right now."

"Metal Sonic was there?" That surprised Callous a bit, but it made her think about it. *She must have gone to warn him...* she thought.

"...it seems to me we need a little more time to come up with a more suitable battle plan," she said.

"Yeah... too bad that the 'impersonating Jack' trick likely isn't gonna work again." Johnny sighed, as he folded his arms. "So not only do we have to deal with this Jill-chick, but also her friends, Metal Sonic, his goons, and that mysterious woman... we've got a lot of planning to do."

"We should also start training you as well, Johnny," Callous said. Suddenly, she twitched. She sensed another presence nearby, and for a minute she was silent.

Then she reached out and grabbed an invisible throat. "How clever," she said. "Too bad you have the tendency to slip up, Cal."

Appearing in her grip was Cal, because Callous' grip was strong enough to deactivate his cloaking device. He tried to breathe as she choked him.

"Who would've thought that you'd actually have the galls to try and use that Corruption in your system," she said. "Now tell me; how

were you able to do that trick without being corrupted yourself?"

"Hn?" Glancing at Cal, Johnny scoffed. "Great; one of Metal's goons." he muttered, before cracking his knuckles. "Let's kill him, before he becomes a problem."

"I like that idea," Callous said, with her grip on Cal's neck tightening ten-fold, causing Cal to gag severely. "His life was too worthless anyway."

Cal clawed at the hand around his neck, but he was failing to pry himself away from her grip.

"Oh, this is gonna be fun..." Johnny chuckled.

At that point, however, something would click in Cal's mind, as he received an automated message in his head. *EMERGENCY OVERRIDE. AUTOPILOT OF AGENT SNITCH : ASSUMED.*

Against Cal's will, his body suddenly aimed a powerful kick at Callous, or more specifically, the arm currently choking him, with the intention of forcing her to let go.

Callous being blind didn't see that coming, and it was a big surprise to her since the kick successfully knocked her arm away. "What the hell?" she uttered.

"Oh, tough one, eh?" Johnny uttered, as he rushed at Cal, reeling back his fist. "Just stay still, and let me kill you!"

As Johnny punched, however, Cal suddenly aimed a kick right at the fist, stopping it, and knocking Johnny away. *PRIMARY OBJECTIVE: ESCAPE.* the message in Cal's mind uttered, as he began running away. *EXIT VIA SAME ENTRYWAY; AUTHORIZING PROPER ACTION.*

As his body ran, Cal felt some sense of control come over him again, and he ran without letting up, leaping up and disappearing into the void above, leaving the dark.

"Where did he go?" Callous asked; who was still blind, of course.

"...he bailed." Johnny growled, as he watched where Cal had escaped the dark. "Flew the coop, right through the void..." Then, he scoffed. "Great; more trouble..."

"Damn it," Callous uttered bitterly. "Killing him would've blown off some steam, too."

"Not much we can do about that, now..." Johnny sighed, before he glanced at Callous. "...can't you use Corruption to check up your eyes, or something?"

"No, that cursed Purity is responsible for this blindness," Callous groaned, rubbing her eyes. "It'll go away soon...but I'm forced to deal with it."

"...Purity..." Johnny growled, as the memory of Metal punching him returned. "...guess I can sympathize with you, there; that stuff burns. Damn robot..."

"Damn everyone all to hell in this case," Callous added.

"There it is," Hunter said. "Station Square."

"Well, we shouldn't waste too much time." Sage said, as she flew the group over the city. "Let's hurry and locate the HQ, and get the commander out of there."

"The HQ should be on the outskirts of the city." Wiper said, as he pointed towards the east. "The only way in is through the main gate, but with King, Sage, Ripper and Miser providing a diversion, me, Queen and Hunter should be able to slip into the holding cells unnoticed."

"Well, let's do it!" King laughed, as Sage veered them towards the east. "It's time to show them our true power!"

Hunter suddenly chuckled. "This is just like old times."

"The GOOD old times." King said, as he cracked his neck. "As it should be."

"We're closing in!" At this point, Sage could see a large building on the outskirts of town, likely to be the HQ.

"Great! Miser, get ready to fire a warning shot at the main gate!" King said, as he gave the rhino a nod.

"Alright!" Nodding, Miser hoisted the Stinger she had borrowed from Newt over her shoulder, before beginning to line up a shot.

"Hey, whats that up there?" A random GUN solder asked, pointing up at them.

The Sergeant passed by, and glanced up at where the soldier was pointing. Then his eyes widened. "...no, it can't be..."

"Fire!" At that point, Miser fired a rocket from the Stinger, sending it propelling a small distance away from the soldiers they could see; close enough to knock them away, but not so close that it would cause any serious injuries.

"Kekekekekeke! It's on, now!" Ripper laughed, as he, King, Sage and Miser got ready for battle.

"Time to clean up," Sage chuckled, as she suddenly took a nose-dive, dropping Wiper, Hunter and Queen when they were close enough to the ground, before rocketing towards the base, landing in front of the troops.

When they landed, Ripper swung his blades about, Miser aimed her railgun at the forces, Sage cracked her neck, and King folded his arms, all of them smiling. "Hi," King said with a malicious grin.

The same soldier who spotted them earlier looked at them with his knees shaking. "...S-s-s-s-sir-r, are they who we think they are?" he asked.

"Commence attack procedures!" commanded the Sergeant, and on cue, a large squad of GUN soldiers came out and unleashed fire on the four.

However, what the bullets hit was a barrier, as Sage stretched her arms out, creating a forcefield around the four. "Gentlemen..." she

began, as she smirked. "...we won't be needing those."

At that point, King opened his hands, before sending a wave of electricity at the soldiers, but instead of hitting the soldiers, he aimed for their weapons, disabling them.

"...now's our chance." Wiper whispered, as he glanced at Queen and Hunter. "Let's go."

"Right," Hunter said, nodding as he watched the horrified looks on the soldiers once King did what he did. "Lead the way, Dawn."

Wiper nodded, as he began sneaking around the soldiers, whilst they were occupied with King's distraction. Queen and Hunter soon followed.

"Now, my friends..." King began, as he chuckled. "I think it's time that we all sat down and talked over this peacefully-LET'S GET THEM!"

Without warning, King, Ripper and Miser charged right at the soldiers, with Sage in the back, as she lended the three support by blasting any incoming soldiers with psychic waves, as King smacked around a good chunk of them, whilst Ripper took care to only hit the soldiers with the blunt edge of his blades, and Miser, instead of firing her weapons, used them as clubs to knock soldiers away.

All the soldiers screamed.

The Sergeant retreated back, pressing his ear communicator. "Colonel!" he spoke. "It's them! They're here and they're attacking-AGH!" he was cut off by a psychic wave that was sent out by Sage.

While the Colonel didn't respond to the Sergeant's report, he smirked, as he stood up from his seat in his office. *...just as expected.* he thought. "Send in more troops, Sergeant; keep them at bay." Then, he took a gun out from a drawer, before exiting the room.

In the meantime, Wiper had taken Queen and Hunter below the surface, into a basement floor. "The holding cells are down here... if she's a prisoner, this is where she'll most likely be." Wiper muttered.

Hunter sniffed around. One of his abilities was a very keen sense of smell, but it had been a long time and he might have forgotten what the Commander's scent was like.

But he did smell the stench of nicotine.

"Yep, I think she's down here," Hunter said, crinkling his nose distastefully at the scent. "She really needs to quit smoking..."

Queen's ears perked, as she tried to hear anything out of the ordinary down in the basement. And soon enough... "I hear groans. She must be in a daze."

"We're on the right track, then." Wiper said, as he peeked around a corner, spotting no soldiers. "The cells should be that way." he said, with a nod towards one of the halls.

Hunter was the first to tip-toe his way down the hall, following the scent of nicotine against his better judgment.

Wiper soon followed, as Queen went last, ensuring that there weren't any guards around. However, as Hunter and Wiper passed around a corner, she stopped, looking around. *Those noises...* she thought, as her brows furrowed. *...I have a bad feeling...* Swallowing her doubt, she followed Wiper and Hunter.

Soon, the three came across a room, filled with rows and rows of empty cells, save for one, where someone was sitting against the wall. "That should be her." Wiper muttered, as he went closer to her.

Hunter now had to hold his nose to keep from gagging on the overwhelming scent, but he went toward the cell to check and see if it was the Commander.

Thankfully, it was, though she wasn't in the best shape; her entire body had traces of blood on it, and she had a few cuts across her face. Even then, a cigarette was placed between her lips. When she heard voices, she glanced up. "...Agent Wiper?" she uttered. "And... Hunter... Queen..."

"Relax; we'll get you out of here." Wiper said, as he stopped in front of the cell, looking at the commander. "...you look awful. Did they

torture you?"

"Ungh..." The commander nodded, as she winced. "Figures... that colonel is ruthless... only a select few of the troops knows that I'm even here."

"Brilliant," Hunter mumbled. Seeing the keyhole on the cell door, Hunter drew out a claw on one of his fingers and went to work picking the lock.

"...but... why are you helping me out?" the commander uttered, as she looked at Wiper.

"You're a good commander." Wiper said with a nod. "It'd be a shame to have someone of your caliber be locked away."

As Hunter tried picking the lock, Queen glanced at the door, with a worried look. "...someone's coming." she said.

Hunter got the lock the moment she said that, and glanced toward the same door while slowly opening the cell door.

"Come on..." As the door opened, Wiper went into the cell, and helped the commander on her feet. "Let's get you-"

"You won't be going anywhere." At that point, a squad of heavily-armed soldiers burst through the door, aiming their rifles at the agents, as a familiar face walked out through the door after them; the Colonel. "Agent Wiper... I knew you'd bite the bait."

"I figured this was too easy to be true," Hunter muttered.

"And yet you bought into it." the Colonel chuckled, as he folded his arms. "Now that I have you here, it's only a matter of time before King and his merry crew are overwhelmed... and then the fun can begin."

Hearing that made Queen tense. "...fun?"

"All seven of you have powers normal human beings can only hope to attain..." the Colonel began, before he pulled out a gun of his own. "However, with a bit of time, and an extract of your DNA, I can

give soldiers of GUN the same abilities as you have... of course, that would mean that you have to die."

"Whoopee," Hunter groaned. "The Colonel's off his rocker. What else is new?" Though Hunter's sarcasm was cut short when he sensed something.

It was a presence...no, make that two presences. Both of them bore a familiar energy that caused dread for the wolf.

"...and just how do you intend to kill us?" Queen uttered, as she clenched her hands into fists. "Miser is immortal, and King and Sage's powers are beyond what you could imagine."

"Where there's a will, there's a way, Dusk." the Colonel laughed, as he trained his gun on Wiper. "A shame that Johnny isn't around; he'd probably die for an opportunity like this. Men, prepare to fire!" As he said that, the soldiers prepared to shoot.

But before they could shoot, their weapons were shot right out of their hands.

"...hehehehehehh...that's not very nice Mr. Colonel..."

Hunter's head jerked to a dark corner where two tiny figures stood. His senses were tingling like crazy, and he knew they were the ones he sensed. That voice also sounded familiar.

"Besides, their powers are nothing compared to our powers..." the voice continued.

"...no," Hunter uttered. "...that can't be..."

"But it is...Midnight." One of them stepped out, and it was none other than Bloom. Gloom wasn't too far behind from her sister, and while she still looked afraid; Bloom had the most evil little crooked smile on her face.

"...them?" Wiper uttered, as he looked at Bloom and Gloom in shock. "That can't... Sage killed them all those years ago!"

"I don't think that's our biggest concern, right now..." Queen

muttered, as she glanced at Wiper. "We got what we came for; let's regroup with the others, and leave!"

"...you're not going anywhere!" At that point, the Colonel pulled out a second gun, aiming it at Wiper. "...those two first!" Then, he suddenly moved his aim to Bloom and Gloom, firing the gun right at them.

Bloom stopped the bullet with her own hand, just as some black ooze boiled out of the result. "We're not gonna die, Mr. Colonel," Bloom laughed. "We already died! Now it's your turn to die in this game!"

"Corruption!" Hunter blurted, seeing the reaction of Bloom's hand.

"Son of a-" Gritting his teeth, the Colonel quickly dropped his gun, before running out of the room. "Soldiers, take care of them!"

Looking at each other with unease, the soldiers eventually pulled out pistols, before aiming them at Bloom and Gloom.

"Wait!" the Commander suddenly called. "As Commander of GUN... I order you to get away! Do you understand?" Again, the soldiers seemed a bit conflicted about that. "...NOW!" When she yelled like that, it got the soldiers moving, as they ran out of the room in panic.

"Good going." Wiper said, as he nodded to Hunter and Queen. "Let's get out of here!" he said, as he walked out the cell with the Commander, before Queen grabbed her.

"Wait," Hunter said, looking back at Bloom and Gloom. "...you're not here for us, are you?"

"Not right now," Bloom said. "We want the Colonel, but beware...we'll be coming back for you!" With a laugh, Bloom and Gloom took aflutter out into the hall, following where the Colonel had gone. "Ready or not, here we come for you!" Bloom's sick laugh echoed through the halls.

"...let's go." Queen said, as the three ran out, headed back upstairs.

The Colonel, in the meantime, had snuck in a secret hallway, which

led into an elevator, which was currently taking him up towards the surface. "Damn... where did those pests come from?" he muttered, before wiping his brow. "There were only supposed to be those seven..."

All of a sudden, the elevator stopped abruptly in its tracks, and the lights inside of it flickered out.

"Hn?" Looking around, the Colonel gritted his teeth. "What now?"

For a minute, nothing.

Then, something hit the elevator from the ceiling, causing it to shake.

"Eh?" Looking up, the Colonel clenched his hands into fists. "Who's there?"

Once the shaking ceased, there was more silence until scratching sounded. "Coloneeeeeeeel..." two voices whispered menacingly.

"...you two?" It didn't seem like it, but the Colonel was a bit nervous. "Are you trying to kill me? In that case, get it over with quickly!"

"You're a coward," Bloom's voice chuckled.

"T-too easy to sc-scare," Gloom agreed.

A small vent was forced open by claws, as the laughter grew louder.

"...scared?" the Colonel uttered, as he glared up at the vent. "You think I'm scared of death? I created an unstoppable force from nothing but children! Do you think that death would cause me to become scared?" Then, he gritted his teeth. "I regret nothing, you little punks!"

"We don't want your regret. We just want to make you suffer!" Two figures jumped down onto him, and before he knew it, he was being torn apart rapidly by sharp claws and jagged teeth.

If anyone else could hear the screams of pain the Colonel bellowed in his dying breathes, it would likely cause them nightmares for the

rest of their lives.

But no one did.

"HELL YEAH!" Standing on a pile of defeated GUN soldiers, King stood with his arms raised triumphantly. "Who's the best? We're the best!" he laughed.

"...don't you think he's taking it a bit too far, Sage?" Miser uttered, as she watched him.

"Kekekekeke! We are the best!" Standing next to King was Ripper, who was cackling along with King.

"...nah. Not really." Sage said with a mild shrug.

"Mission accomplished!" Hunter's voice called, and the four could suddenly see him, Wiper and Queen approaching with the Commander.

"Ah, took you long enough!" King said, as he and Ripper leapt down from the pile of bodies. ""Well, we're done here! Sage, get ready to take us away!"

"At once, King." Sage nodded, as she glanced at the four others. "You guys have any trouble?"

"...nothing major." Wiper shrugged. "Just a brief run-in with the Colonel. Let's just leave."

"Yes, please," Hunter agreed.

"Alright." Sage said with a nod, as she closed her eyes, before the eight of them began floating in the air.

"...thank you..." the Commander said, as she glanced at the seven agents. "I can't thank you people enough for helping me out... even though you're not part of GUN..."

"...don't sweat it." King shrugged. "We just did what we felt was

right."

Hunter just wanted to get back home so he could check on Ani again, so he didn't respond.

"Well, we're off, then!" Sage said, as she took to the skies, carrying the others after her, as they left the HQ.

Chapter 46

CHAPTER FOURTY-SIX

Jill didn't have the urge to continue training. She sat in that cave waiting and wondering if Metal was coming back. Worrying over her friends caused her doubts to rise again about whether or not to trust Metal. With her head buried in her knees, she waited patiently, but anxiously.

"And what are we doing?" the familiar robotic voice called, as the Metallix walked into the cave, looking down at Jill. *"Skimping out on your training? We're not gonna win many fights like that."*

Jill peeked up to see him. "Are they okay?" she asked.

"Yes, they're safe." Metal shrugged, as he looked down at Jill. *"Johnny tried attacking Jack, but I stopped him."* Then, he sat down, still looking at Jill. *"...these markings."* At that point, he raised his hands, so Jill could see the marks he had from healing Goddess earlier. *"What are they?"*

Jill looked at her own markings, and then at Metal's. "They symbolize concentrated hatred," she said. "Corruption can be its deadliest when that happens..."

"...that must have been how Callous attacked *Goddess ..."* Metal muttered, before he clenched his hands. " *But why do they appear on us?"*

"I've never really known why," Jill said.

"Hmph. Figures..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...Jill. I want to ask you something, but..."* Then, he looked back at Jill. *"...I can't be too safe, in case Callous is listening in. Is there any way for us to converse in complete privacy?"*

Jill tried to think.

Hey Jill...there's something you can try with the emerald that'll help ya with that!

Jill's head perked up when she heard that. Her eyes fell upon her satchel, and she pulled out the white emerald. *Try what?* she wondered. Maybe it was another ability of hers she could do with the emeralds?

Metal had an emerald, and she had one. Due to that fact, she wondered if maybe she could use the connection of the emeralds to her advantage with Purity. With some concentration, the emerald in her hand began to glow. Shortly after, Metal could feel the emerald in his chassis reacting.

Jill and Metal sat across from each other as the world faded around them, bringing them into a big blue void.

Metal would recognize that they were somehow in the Special Zone.

"..." Looking around him, Metal blinked. *"...well... this is new."* Then, he looked at Jill. *"You sure have a way with the emeralds, Jill."*

"Apparently I do," Jill uttered, looking around in awe. She had no idea how they got here... "What is this place?" she asked.

"The Special Zone." Metal said, as he nodded at the Chaos Emerald Jill held. *"The place where those gems originally came from."* Then, he stood up. *"Well, we'll be safe from eavesdropping in here..."*

"Alright," Jill said. "What is it you wanted to ask me Metal?"

"...you know why I train you, Jill; so that you'll be able to defeat Callous." Metal began, as he folded his arms. *"...but even my training is no guarantee; there is a chance that you could lose."* Then, he looked down at Jill. *"While we're both going to aim for your victory... if you happen to lose..."*

"...yes?" Jill said, urging him to continue.

"...if you happen to lose..." Metal continued, as he reached out his arm to Jill. *"...then do not let Callous do as she pleases with you."* At that point, the arm began giving off a dark glow, which Jill would instantly recognize. *"Let me kill you, instead."*

Jill gasped, feeling her heart shudder with fear. "What?"

"You said so yourself; your soul is connected to Callous' soul. If one of you dies, so will the other." As he said this, Metal clenched the dark arm's hand into a fist. *"This is only for desperate measures , in the event that you lose. I don't doubt you for a second... but allow me to kill you, if Callous should happen to defeat you in your duel."*

"...but...do we really have to resort to such extreme measures like that?" Jill asked uneasily. "If I were to lose, even then, I could still try to stop her."

"Under normal circumstances, yes." Metal nodded. " *However, we did make that wager. If you lose, she'll be certain to try and take you away on the spot to claim her prize."* Then, the dark glow around Metal's arm disappeared as he stood up. *"But since I'll be watching, the moment you lose, I could swoop in, and end your life, and Callous' existence."* At that point, he closed his eyes. *"...it's an extreme that I honestly do not wish to go to... but if it can stop Callous..."* Then, he opened his eyes, looking down at Jill. *"...what do you say?"*

Jill looked back at Metal in disdain. While Metal had been surprisingly honest with her, she just couldn't believe the request. "...I'll have to think about it," she said, turning away from him.

"You have four days to think about it," Metal said, before he sat down. *"In the meantime, you can't skip out on your training."*

"...right," she replied with her head hung low.

"Geez Metal, do you really have to put so much pressure on the poor girl?"

Jill jumped and whirled around. She heard that voice loud and clear, and was very surprised to hear it.

She wondered if Metal heard it, because that sounded like Sonic.

If she looked at Metal, she could see that he had heard it, as his eyes were wide-open in surprise. *"...S-Sonic?"* he uttered, as he got on his feet, looking around. *"Where... where are you?"*

Sonic's voice whistled. "Hey, up here you two!"

Jill turned to where the voice came from, and sure enough, there was the infamous blue hedgehog afloat in the void above them, looking at them with a wide smirk.

"I gotta hand it to ya Jill," he said. "You've come a long way."

"...it's... really him..." Metal uttered, as he looked up at Sonic; at the moment, he was far too surprised to do anything but gawk at this sight.

"And that's not all, Metal," Sonic chuckled. "Take a look around."

Jill did, and she saw the others; Knuckles, Tikal, Amy, Rouge, Vector, Espio, and Mighty were surrounding Jill and Metal. It was like the time Sage had entered into Jill's mind, only Shadow wasn't present for obvious reasons.

"...n-no way..." Metal uttered, as he looked at all of them.

"Way." Espio said with a nod to the Metallix, as he couldn't help but smirk.

"How are you guys...?" Jill didn't know how to phrase the question she was going to ask.

"Something in the Special Zone stream of energy has an effect on us," Knuckles said. "We're flesh and blood in here."

"... flesh and blood ?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at Sonic. *"...in that case... Sonic, come down here."*

Jill gave Metal a strange look. *What's he doing?* she thought.

Sonic shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," and soon enough, he sank down to Metal.

As he did that, Metal closed his eyes. *"...Sonic. Promise me that you'll stay perfectly still, for the next ten seconds,"* he said.

Jill pinched her brows. *Oh, I know what he's going to do,* she thought, while Sonic nodded in response to Metal.

"...I may never get an opportunity like this again..." At that point, Metal suddenly reeled back his arm, before shooting it forward, intending to punch Sonic squarely in the face. When Sonic was knocked down by that punch in the face, Jill was horrified.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?" she screamed.

As Sonic fell to the ground, Metal shook his hand, before sighing. *"...there. That's for dying before I could kill you, Sonic. Thank you for letting me do that."* he said, completely ignoring Jill.

"No prob." Sonic sat up, and despite the bloody nose he had, it didn't look like the punch did all that much to him. "You've been waiting for 50 years to do that, haven't you? I just figured I'd let you get that out of your system." Then he stood up and wiped his nose. "Besides, I'm already dead. What could you possibly do to me?"

"Don't tempt him Sonic," Jill said.

Knuckles laughed. "I'll admit, I enjoyed watching that."

"But man, it looked like it really hurt," Mighty uttered, as he held his chin. "I sure wouldn't want that to the face..."

"...well, I feel satisfied." Metal said, as he looked at the hand he had punched Sonic with. *"...wait. Sonic, I need to know."* Then, he looked at the hedgehog. *"...who did it?"*

"That's it?" Sonic asked curiously. "You're not even wondering why I disappeared in the first place before I died? Now that just kills the fun of story-telling..."

"I don't particularly care for all those details." Metal said, as he approached Sonic. *"All I want to know is the identity of yours, Fang's and Knuckles ' killer."*

Both Sonic and Knuckles shared looks. Regretfully, Sonic turned to Metal and sighed. "...he never told me his name, but he used an unreal power that even I couldn't fight." He looked at Jill. "She knows who it is."

When all looks were directed at her, Jill grew nervous. "How do I know who it is?" I asked, baffled.

"You've seen the flashback Chaos showed you," Tikal said. "Don't forget Jillian; we reside inside your mind. We know what you're thinking."

"...you knew that I recognized the markings all over Sonic and Knuckles?" Jill croaked.

Everyone except Metal nodded.

Jill didn't like the pressure directed at her. However, they were right; she had a suspicion who it might have been, but the possibility was too shocking for Jill. "...no," she said, shaking her head. "You don't mean..." she took steps away from them. "You're not serious are you? You're not saying that...Deity Novagod killed you, right?"

Sonic looked deeply at Jill, and finally, he nodded. "Yes Jill. Deity Novagod is the one who killed me, Fang, and Knuckles."

"...he..." At that point, Metal backed a bit away from Sonic as well, his eyes wide open again. *"...Novagod killed you... but why?"*

"That's why I wanted to share my little story about my last adventure," Sonic said. "See, after Dark Gaia was sealed away safely, there was a good vacation. Then came all the events of Eggman's end...a lot of us were wasted to the max after that." Grave looks from everyone confirmed that. "...awhile after Eggman's death, weird things started to happen," Sonic continued. "I decided to go investigate them, but after what happened...I didn't want my friends to get hurt. I left without saying anything, and disappeared from the

face of the earth."

"Which was the STUPIDEST thing to do, might I add!" Amy threw in sternly.

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" Sonic said. "But the truth was...I discovered this unreal power the guy used and I wanted to learn more about it. I found out what it was, and what it did to people, and I set out to stop the guy who used this power for horrible things beyond imagination."

"When I found him though..." the hedgehog then turned away shamefully.

"...he killed you." Metal muttered. *"And he killed Knuckles , as well, likely due to his role as guardian of the Master Emerald ..."* Then, he blinked. *"...but why Fang ? What could he possibly gain from killing Fang the Sniper?"*

"There was a ransom for anyone that could solve my murder," Sonic said. "Fang probably wanted the ransom, and just so happen to stumble upon that Deity-character."

"...hmph. He didn't deserve being killed by *Deity ."* Metal scoffed, before turning away from Sonic. *"None of you did."*

"Ooooh, Metal, did I catch a little sensitivity from you?" Rouge teased.

"N-no!" Metal quickly said with a huff, before looking away from the bat. *"I just... wanted to kill you all myself, that's all!"*

"You just keep telling yourself that, Metal..." Vector said with a chuckle.

"Then as luck would have it..." Sonic turned to Jill again, smiling this time. "...all the answers we were looking for came along, running a fever in the Mystic Ruins jungle where that bull found you."

"Sonic," Jill spoke. "...do you know anything about my power? Or about Corruption for that matter? Is there anything that you know that I don't?"

Sonic waved his hand iffy-like. "Yes and no," he said. "We know someone who knows what Purity and Corruption truly are; two people in fact." He held out a finger, "one of them's a good friend of mine." Then he held up another; with a total of two fingers. "The other one's your mom; and she's working for candidate number one."

"...a good friend ?" Blinking, Metal turned to look at Sonic. *"...how does that work? Aside from Prower, Charmy and Cream, all your friends are dead!"* As he said that, he glanced around. *"...aren't they?"*

"Heh," Sonic laughed at Metal's confusion, since he found it so amusing. "I don't exactly know what to consider him, but the friend I'm talking about was a good buddy who helped me with Dark Gaia."

Jill remembered the story Tails told her about Dark Gaia, and while Tails' story wasn't as detailed as it could have been, she instantly knew who Sonic was talking about. "...Light Gaia," she said.

"She's a smart girl," Rouge admitted.

"...but how are we supposed to get in contact with him?" Metal uttered. *"Especially since I need to keep training her, until her last battle with Callous."*

"Oh, you can let her have a day off from training, can't ya?" Vector said with a shrug.

"Listen guys," Sonic said. "We got to let you go. Jill's ability to tap into the Special Zone can only last so long, and while she can't feel it here, she'll feel the strain later." Suddenly, Metal and Jill were blinded by a bright light, having to cover their eyes.

"Just visit one of the Gaia temples," advised Sonic's voice. "The rest will come to you."

Metal and Jill came back to reality, and returned back into the cave they had been sitting in; the rain still proceeding to pour outside the mouth of the cave.

As he realized that they had returned to the cave, Metal was silent. Then, he turned away from Jill, closing his eyes. *...so Novagod killed him...* he thought.

Jill simply tried to get up, but once she was on her feet, she lost her equilibrium. Dropping the Chaos Emerald, she fell over weakly. However, a pair of tendrils were quick to ensure that she didn't fully collapse, as they slowly got her on her feet.

"...maybe you should rest up." Metal noted, as the tendrils retracted into his body, still without the Metallix looking at her.

Jill managed to get herself to a wall and she sat down with her back against it. "...Metal," she said, noticing his behavior, "are you going to be okay?"

"I'll manage." Metal said with a wave to Jill. " *Don't worry about me."*

Jill left it at that, with her head falling against the wall tiredly. Outside, she could see the sun was setting and it was getting late; and it rained still. While wondering how long they had been in the Special Zone, Jill couldn't stop her droopy eye-lids from closing as she fell into a light slumber.

...Novagod... Metal thought, as he was scraping his fingers against the floor of the cave, a murderous look in his eyes. *...you'd best start praying that the day of your release never comes...* As he thought, his arms began taking a green glow, before it quickly faded away. *...because when that day comes... I'll kill you myself.*

"It's getting pretty late," Boomer murmured while looking out the window. "I hope they're still okay."

"Yeah..." Newt nodded, as he looked out the window, too. "It shouldn't take that long, y'know..." he muttered.

Boomer yawned drowsily, but she tried to fight how tired she was. She wanted to make sure that the GUN operatives had returned safely before she could rest easy.

Newt briefly glanced at Boomer, before smiling just a bit. Then, he

glanced back out the window, and... "...hey, there they are!" As they could see, the GUN agents, all carried by Sage, were approaching the HQ at a decent speed, soon landing outside of the building.

Boomer was suddenly wide awake, and she shot through the halls to meet the GUN agents outside, though she was halted in the middle of the hallway by the strain of her wound. "Ow," she hissed, wincing.

"Hey, you shouldn't run around like that, y'know!" Newt called, as he followed Boomer out in the hall, before supporting her on his shoulder. "Don't worry; I'll help ya outside." he said, as he led her down the hall.

"Thanks," mumbled Boomer, who tried to hide the fact she was blushing.

Outside, Hunter let out a deep sigh. "We did it," he said, smiling with relief.

"Well, was there any doubt?" King laughed, as he patted Queen and Hunter on their backs. "You know, we oughta find a bottle of booze, and split it between us, for celebration!"

"Come off it, King; you know me and Miser don't drink." Sage said with a chuckle, as the agents approached the door, with Wiper opening it up. When Wiper opened up the door, there was Newt and Boomer coming down the hall.

"Guys!" Boomer called. "You made it back!"

"Way to go, guys!" Newt said, as he gave the group a thumbs-up.

"Hm... it wasn't that difficult, really." Queen shrugged, as she walked past Boomer and Newt, holding the GUN Commander in her arms. "I'll treat her wounds; it's nothing serious, but better safe than sorry."

"Hey..." the Commander asked as Queen carried her off. "...when I wake up, can I borrow a smoke from someone? The rain soaked what I had on me..."

When Queen and the Commander were gone, King closed the door

behind the agents. "Man, I could use a shower..." he muttered.

"You and me, both... kekekeke..." Ripper nodded.

"Say, where's Captain Charmy?" Hunter asked.

"The Captain's with your daughter, Hunter," Boomer replied, which cued Hunter to walk down the hall to the said destination.

"She's been well in our absence?" Sage presumed, as she glanced at Newt.

"Yeah, she's been asleep all day, y'know." Newt nodded.

"At least she's alright..." Miser muttered, before she realized that she was holding Newt's Stinger. "Um... where should I put this, again?"

"Just put it in my room for now. We'll put it up," Boomer said.

"Alright." Miser nodded, as she went down the hall as well.

"So, Ani aside, has everything been fine here?" Sage inquired, as she eyed Boomer and Newt with a playful smirk.

"Hey, are you accusing us of something?" Boomer asked a bit defensively, already turning red again.

"Whatever gave you that impression?" Sage asked, playing innocent as she looked away from them, though a smirk was still present on her.

"Well, that look ya gave us, y'know!" Newt shot in.

"Let's not start quarreling here..." Wiper said, as he glanced at Boomer and Newt. "The important thing is that we're all safe."

"I agree," Boomer said. "It's good to see you guys came back safely."

"Eh, like Queen said, it wasn't that big a deal." King chuckled, as he, Ripper and Wiper began walking down the hall. "Welp, see ya around. We need to catch some shut-eye."

Sage also followed the agents, but not before glancing at Boomer and Newt. "Play it safe, now." she said in a teasing tone, before walking down the hall.

"...what's that supposed to mean?" Newt uttered, as he briefly looked at Sage, before looking down at Boomer.

"Uh, don't know," Boomer replied in unsureness, but she was still blushing without her knowledge.

"...um, Boomer..." Newt uttered, as he cleared his throat. "You, uh... you're blushing." As he said that, he couldn't help but blush as well.

"Oh, I am?" She asked worriedly.

"Y-yeah, but..." Newt began, as he scratched the back of his head. "...it's... kinda cute, y'know..."

"...really?" Boomer let out a small shy giggle.

"Yeah..." Newt nodded, as he couldn't help but laugh a bit sheepishly.

"Uh!" Boomer snapped out of it and turned down the hall. "We should, uh, go put the Stinger away before it gets too late and we, um, forget about it," she said.

"Oh, uh... yeah, we should." Newt nodded, as he turned around, before helping Boomer down the hall.

Once they got to her room, Boomer saw the Stinger sitting on her bed. "There it is," she said, walking to it.

"Uh... you sure you don't need a hand with that?" Newt said, as he walked to the bed as well. "It's kinda heavy, and, well, you're not in the best shape possible..."

"Oh, sure," Boomer said, while she tried to pick it up.

As she attempted to lift it, Newt took hold of it as well, helping her lift the Stinger off the bed, before glancing towards an empty shelf close-by. "That one?" he asked, as he looked at Boomer.

"Yeah, that works," she said.

"Alright..." Nodding, Newt hoisted the Stinger up in the air, before carefully placing it on the shelf. "There we go..."

"...thanks..." Boomer found herself looking up at Newt in a daze.

"...no... problem..." Newt nodded, as he turned around, looking down at Boomer.

Boomer looked at Newt silently, rubbing her arm anxiously.

"...so, um..." Newt uttered, as he rubbed his neck, in the same manner as Boomer rubbed her arm.

"...well," Boomer muttered. Her mind was totally blank for words.

As was Newt's, as he scratched his cheek. "...well, I..." he began, as he somehow found himself taking a step closer to Boomer.

Noticing this, Boomer took a step closer too. Then she looked back up at Newt and a smile crossed her face.

Newt looked down at Boomer with a smile as well, as he gently took hold of her hands.

When she felt Newt's hands, she felt goosebumps all over, and she took a deep breath.

"...you nervous?" Newt asked, as he tilted his head.

"A little," she muttered.

"...me too." Newt admitted, as he smiled.

Boomer chuckled slightly at that, and it wasn't long until she leaned in and kissed him. As she kissed him, Newt couldn't help but start gently stroking Boomer's arm, as he kissed her back. Boomer felt Newt's big, strong arms and then his chest while she kissed him. Newt then moved his other arm towards her back, stroking it, as he kept kissing Boomer. Boomer was amazed how gentle Newt could be and she was entranced by it while the make-out carried on,

clutching to him dearly. Newt then gently wrapped his arms around Boomer, making sure not to be too rough, as he pulled her closer to him. Boomer wrapped her arms around Newt's neck warmly, hoping to be even closer. Their bodies were now pressing against each other, as both of them were completely lost in the make-out.

Since they were absorbed in that, however, neither of them noticed that the door silently closed itself, being locked as well. "...play it safe, now." someone out in the hall muttered with a minor chuckle, as Sage walked away from the door without making a sound.

Chapter 47

CHAPTER FOURTY-SEVEN

"Is that really true, Jack?" Striker asked. The kids were all gathered in Striker's room, talking amongst themselves when Jack told them why he was with Metal Sonic. "Is it true that Metal's actually helping Jill to fight Callous?"

"Yeah, he said that he was training her!" Jack said, as he looked at the others with a huge smile. "It's really weird, but Jill trusts him! They even teamed up to help Goddess, after Callous had attacked her!"

"Wow," Rudy muttered in amazement.

"I wonder why Metal's doing that," Milo said, petting a sleeping Buddy on his lap.

"I don't know; none of them told me." Jack said, as he scratched his head. "...maybe he doesn't like Callous?"

"Nobody likes Callous!" Striker said. "After all the nasty things she did, I wouldn't blame Metal Sonic."

"...and Goddess is really Jill's mom?" Milo asked.

"Yeah, Jill said so, herself." Jack nodded, as he folded his arms. "But for some reason, Goddess couldn't stay and talk with Jill, even after Jill and Metal helped her..."

"Jack," Rudy said, "...how come that Johnny guy looks a lot like you?"

"..." That actually made Jack look a lot more serious, as he closed his eyes. "...I don't wanna think about it... but he said that he was my uncle." he eventually said.

They all shot Jack shocked looks. "No way!" they all said

simultaneously.

"But how could he be your uncle?" Rudy asked. "He looks just as old as you are!"

"Well..." Jack began, as he tapped his chin. "...he said something about him dying, but he didn't go into detail about it." Then, he looked down at the floor. "...but I don't get it, either. Mom never told me about him; in fact, she always told me that she was an only child..."

Milo looked at Jack sadly. "...maybe your mom didn't like Johnny, or she was afraid of him. Sometimes when people are afraid of someone because they're bad, they don't tell you about them. I think they do that as a way to protect you from them." Then he turned to the window, where the night had already crept in. "...I could tell that guy did a lot of bad things just by looking at him. That's how I knew he wasn't you, Jack."

"...yeah..." Jack muttered, as he recalled what Johnny had told him earlier.

"If Vanessa ever comes around... tell her that she is an utter disgrace to the Leoniel name!"

"...I do wonder what's up with that surname; Mom didn't want me to call myself by that name..." he muttered, as he scratched his head.

"Who knows," Striker said.

What was unknown to them was that Brick had been outside the door of Striker's bedroom, listening in on their conversation. He finally forced himself to pull away that moment, knowing that eavesdropping was kind of rude, but even then, he started to think about what they said. Johnny certainly was a bad character if it convinced Metal to come and take care of him, and since it seemed like he was in cahoots with Callous, things were really going to take a bad turn.

Then that talk about Goddess and Metal really had him confused. He remembered what Proxy had told him about Metal and Jill, but

hearing Jack say that Jill trusted Metal absolutely baffled him; since Jill was usually very careful before she thought about trusting a former enemy. It also added to his and Proxy's suspicions that Metal wasn't just trying to keep the title of baddest enemy.

He helped Jill's mother and her, and bad guys wouldn't usually do that without something in return. From what it sounded like, Metal was being considerably generous for someone like him.

What are you trying to do, Metal Sonic? he wondered.

"...what'cha doing?" he would hear someone say, as Tails Doll fluttered towards the bull, tilting his head.

"I'm thinking," Brick said. Then he gave Tails Doll a suspicious glance. "Say…you wouldn't happen to know why your 'Big Bro' is helping Brownie, would you?"

" *...Big Bro is helping Jill?* " Tails Doll uttered without a clue, as if he didn't already know this, as he tilted his head. " *...I guess he doesn't like Callous, and wants to help Jill take her down.* " he shrugged.

Brick sighed. To be honest, he already got that answer before, and he knew there had to be a more meaningful reason than that, but he decided not to push it with the doll. It could very well be possible that Tails Doll doesn't know either.

"Never mind," he said, heading toward his room. He wondered if working on some Extreme Gears would take his mind off things.

Tails Doll watched as Brick left, before he closed his eyes. *...Big Bro, when do you think we should try your plan out?*

In the morning. You know what to do.

...yeah, Big Bro. With a nod, Tails Doll glanced at the door leading in to the kid's room, before he fluttered towards it, lightly knocking on it.

The door opened and Striker looked to see Tails Doll. "Hey Tails Doll!" he greeted. "Come on in!"

" *Thanks!* " Tails Doll said cheerfully, as he fluttered in. " *What's up?*

"

"Not much; we're just talking." Jack said in equal cheerfulness, as he glanced at the plushie.

Milo looked nervously at Tails Doll. By now, his fear had eased a little, but he was still unsure about the doll. He couldn't sense anything about it because it didn't have a soul…and that's what kept Milo on the edge about it.

"I wonder what the Captain and Boomer are up to," Rudy murmured, rocking back and forth holding his long kangaroo feet.

"Me, too..." Jack nodded, as he rubbed his chin, before snapping his fingers. "Maybe we can go to the Professor tomorrow, and call the Captain to see what they're doing?"

"Yeah," Milo agreed. "I'd like to know if Boomer's okay, and if Ani's okay too."

"I certainly hope Ani's okay," added Striker sadly. "I kinda miss not having her around."

"Yeah..." Jack nodded.

Tails Doll was silent, as he looked from each of the kids, before glancing at Jack. " *...think you can play the harmonica for us?* " he asked.

"Hey, I like that idea," Milo said.

"Just make sure the microphone is off before you play it," Striker reminded.

"...okay!" Jack said with a smile, as he took out his harmonica, before making sure that the instrument's microphone was shut off. "Which song do you guys wanna hear?"

"You go ahead and pick one Jack," Milo said. "We don't mind."

Once Callous' blindness was gone, it occurred to her that Bloom and Gloom were missing…

…so she and Johnny were waiting in the dark for them to return from…wherever they had gone.

Sure enough, they showed up in a bloody mess, grinning wickedly.

Callous looked them over curiously. "Where were the two of you?"

Bloom cackled. "Taking our revenge…"

"Man, you kids must have let yourselves go, alright." Johnny noted, as he could only chuckle. "So, who's the unlucky sap?"

It was Gloom who let out an evil giggle this time, which was unusual for her. "Why…it was that despicable man they bothered to call a 'Colonel,' who started the whole mess in the beginning."

"We might be evil," Bloom said, "but we still hate that man for what he brought us into."

"And now he's dead," Gloom finished, licking the blood off her nails. "So you don't have to worry much about him Johnny."

"The Colonel's dead, huh?" Johnny noted, before he sighed. "Shame. I wanted to do him in after taking care of the renegades... oh well, what're ya gonna do?" Then, he raised an eyebrow. "Wait... where'd you guys finish him off, anyway?"

"There was telling of a GUN HQ located in Station Square, where the Colonel apparently was holding the Commander of GUN captive," Bloom began. "While we were there…well, we happened to stumble upon King and his friends, and they raided the place to rescue their beloved Commander. We could've gone after them…"

"…but we gave them up to kill the Colonel instead," Gloom finished.

"Really now?" Callous muttered.

"...huh." Johnny uttered, as he looked at the two butterflies. "You know, I honestly thought that you two would take any chance you could to get back at Sage; after all, she ended up killing you to begin with, right?"

"Yesssssssss," both of them hissed bitterly.

"But even then, we had to be patient," Bloom continued. "Right then wouldn't have been the right time to strike, with those like King, Queen, Wiper, Miser, Ripper, and—"

"Hold up!" Callous interrupted. She walked over to the two of them and shot a very stern look at them. "What do you mean Ripper was there?"

Bloom and Gloom realized they forgotten that Ripper was possessed by Slashers before, and after they suggested he check up on Jill awhile back…

…the two gulped at their mistake.

"Are you saying that Slashers is no more?" Callous supposed angrily. "How did that happen?"

"Don't you mean Slashers *are* no more? They seemed fairly keen at reminding us that there was more than one of them." Johnny noted, as he looked down at the butterflies. "Well? Do you have an explanation?"

"Well, uh…we said maybe he—uh, they, should check on Jill?" Bloom uttered. "You know…to make sure she didn't get a feeling you were up to something?"

Callous smacked her forehead. "…did you even know that Metal Sonic was with her?"

"He was?" they both questioned in disbelief.

Callous groaned. "Never mind…I guess the best explanation is that she figured out a way to dispose Slashers and free Ripper from their control…" She clenched her fists in irritation and turned away, not wanting to look at them. "As evil as you two are, you still think like damn children!"

"We're sorry!" they both protested.

"Well, to be perfectly fair, both of 'em died when they were, what,

eight?" Johnny said, before he glanced at Callous. "Besides, maybe there was some other factor that led to Ripper taking charge?"

"Doesn't matter," Callous grumbled. "That doesn't change that fact that we still need to come up with some major plan of sabotage."

"Right..." Johnny nodded, as he rubbed his chin in thought. "...but the question is how we're gonna go by it. For some reason, I get the feeling that Metal Sonic's actively *trying* to make sure that we have no real opportunity of getting Jill's friends."

"I'd laugh if he was doing it because he had feelings for her," Callous said, "but I doubt it's possible that the Toaster could feel anything."

"Yeah..." Johnny muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...though... what if he actually *did* have feelings for her?" he eventually said, as he glanced at Callous. "You could confront him about it; it could throw him off his guard, if anything."

"Hm," Callous rubbed her chin thoughtfully while she thought about it. "That's not a bad idea, and even if Metal is hard to trick…it could cloud his judgment under the influence of Corruption…"

"Which, in turn, could have serious effects on how he interacts with Jill." Johnny added, as he fully turned to face Callous. "So in short; weaken the robot, and everything crumbles around Jill."

"Attacking the source," Callous mused. "…but we'll have to take careful steps on this one. The last few plots were torn down because we weren't vigilant enough."

"But your fight with Jill is in 4 days," reminded Bloom.

"You think I don't know that?" Callous said. "Besides, what does that have to do with this plan? Sure, it means we won't have a lot of time to do it, but…"

Callous stopped, because something clicked in her mind. A very wicked grin crept across her face. "Then again, we don't have to affect Metal directly."

"What do you mean?" Gloom asked with a tilted head.

Callous snapped her fingers, bringing forth her motorcycle. She reached into the leather pocket that was hanging on it, and pulled something out.

It was that little figurine of the chibi Metal that he had given her, before her mission to retrieve the black emerald from the GUN base. It was somehow deactivated too, looking to be in sleep.

"Aha," Callous chuckled. "I figured he might have forgotten about it."

"...what's that?" Johnny uttered, as he looked at the figurine. "Some form of toy?"

"From what I gathered," Callous said. "He told me that it was his connection to me, but that would mean that this thing is connected to him…so if something were to happen to it," she shot Johnny a smirk, hoping he would catch her drift.

"Aah, I see where you're getting at." Johnny nodded, as he folded his arms. "But are you sure that it's gonna work? For all we know, it could end up giving him our location."

"C'mon," Callous rolled her eyes. "The dark can't be located, and Metal would be too afraid to try and enter in here even if he knew where we were. He didn't even want to touch the black emerald after he heard that Corruption could affect machinery too."

"...I suppose you have a point." Johnny nodded, as he folded his arms. "Still, he's somehow capable of handling some energy called Purity to counteract Corruption. And believe me when I say that the stuff hurts like hell."

"Are you saying that you doubt your own idea, Johnny?" Callous questioned.

"No." Johnny replied quickly, as he rubbed his cheek. "I guess I'm still a bit sore over him actually hurting me; not many can do that." Then, he gave Callous a nod. "Well, try it out, and we'll see what happens."

Callous clenched the figurine in her hand, and shortly a small mass of black ooze bubbled out of her hand, growing on the figurine. She

let her pure hatred out in it; realizing just how much she hated that Metallix.

She had hated him almost as much as she hated Goddess..

At first, nothing seemed to happen, as the figurine remained deactivated. Soon, however, its eyes began glowing; however, rather than the standard red color, it was a darker shade of red, which slowly began blinking from red to dark red, the dark red growing darker with every blink.

Callous chuckled when she saw this. "Good…it seems to be working."

Johnny watched the figure with interest, as he folded his arms, before smirking. *Let's see just what'll happen.*

Metal's eyes shot open. *...what was that?* he thought, as he looked around him, before noticing the still-sleeping Jill. *...strange...* Then, he got up, before glancing out of the cave. As it turned out, it was morning again, and the rain had finally stopped. *Good. That means that I can initiate my little plan...*

The slumbering Jill shook a little; whether it was from cold or it was another nightmare was unknown.

With a slight glance at Jill, Metal closed his eyes. *...well, we know that you can handle fire... but in case Callous plans on something more...* Then, he walked back in the cave, before sitting down, looking at Jill. *...relax; you'll thank me for this.* At that point, he vanished, and after a short while, in his place, Tails Doll now sat.

That was when Jill awoke with a start, sitting up. She wiped the cold sweat from her brow, while taking deep breaths.

She had that same nightmare again, only somehow…it was worse than the last time.

" *...did you have a nightmare, Jill?* " Tails Doll uttered, as he fluttered closer to the ewe. " *You don't look too good...* "

Jill jumped, seeing Tails Doll instead of Metal. "Tails Doll?" she uttered. "How did you get here? And where's Metal?"

" *Big Bro wanted to do something different, today.* " Tails Doll responded, as he tilted his head. " *But... Jill, what kind of nightmare did you have?* "

"Oh…well, something was chasing me." Jill left it at that, because it was scary for her to think about it.

" *Aah...* " Tails Doll nodded, as he folded his arms. " *Well, in any case, Big Bro wanted me to train you for today, or at least until he comes back! So, do you want to begin?* "

"You're training me?" Jill blinked at Tails Doll in amazement. Tails Doll didn't appear to be threatening very much with his plushie appearance.

She knew better than to be deceived by appearances though, so she nodded. "Sure, let's begin."

" *Yay!* " Tails Doll cheered, as he spun around in the air, happily. " *I'm gonna make Big Bro proud! Now...* " Then, he stopped, as he looked at Jill. " *...what are you afraid of?* "

"Let's see," Jill looked around while thinking. "Metal managed to cure my fear of fire, so that's done with," she said.

" *That's good and all, but...* " Tails Doll began, as he began hanging a bit limply in mid-air, as the gem on his head began blinking. Then...

" *...what are you* truly *afraid of...?* "

Even though the sudden shift in Tails Doll's tone would be off-putting, all of a sudden, the gem on his head began glowing brightly, and somehow, Jill would find herself in some sort of trance, leaving her no time to wonder about the shift in tone.

"…wha?" she uttered lifelessly.

" *Listen to the sound of my voice...* " Tails Doll uttered, as his head

began bobbing from side to side. " *...look into yourself... and reveal to me your deepest fears...* " As he said this, the scenery around them seemed to change, and Tails Doll's movements became more and more erratic.

Jill didn't respond to the creepy appearance of Tails Doll while she was lost. "…I'm afraid of…letting down the ones who depend on me…" she mumbled.

" *Is that so...?* " Tails Doll uttered, as somehow, a mouth slowly began growing on the doll's muzzle. " *Go on...what else do you fear..?* "

"…I'm afraid of being…alone," Jill continued.

" *Really...* " Tails Doll nodded, as the mouth on his muzzle began curling up into a toothy grin, as his head tilted limply to the side. " *Go on... impart all your deepest fears with me...* "

"…I'm afraid…of Callous," Jill let out. "I'm afraid of Deity too…no matter how much I want to fight it, I'm afraid of them…"

" *I see...* " Tails Doll nodded, as he began floating up in the air, his grin growing wider. " *Now, get ready; to conquer your deepest fears... you must confront them...* " Then...

" *...so tell me, Jill... can you feel the sunshine...?* "

At that point, the gem on Tails Doll's head opened up, and released an orange-colored gas, that instantly covered Jill, forcing her to inhale it.

And while inhaling it, Jill couldn't help but cough.

Soon, the gas began clearing out, but as it did, Jill would suddenly realize something; she was no longer in the cave, but rather, in a featureless, dark void. What was worse was that Tails Doll seemed to have vanished.

She was alone.

Jill became immediately scared. In an effort to stay calm, she took

deep breaths.

In that instant, however, she heard what sounded like a blade cutting through flesh, and a shriek of terror. But not just any shriek; it was a shriek from a child.

Striker.

"No!" Jill screamed, as it was getting harder and harder to keep calm. She was so scared that she began to hyperventilate.

The same sound suddenly repeated several times over, each time producing a different-sounding shriek. First Milo, then Jack, then Buddy, then Ani.

Then, there was silence.

Soon, a doorway seemed to open in the distance, and some unseen force began slowly pulling Jill towards it.

Jill was so confused and afraid of what was happening that she didn't fight the pull.

While Jill was pulled, more shrieks and cries of terror began roaring around her; most of them unfamiliar, but some of them shockingly recognizable. The GUN Agents, the Chaotix Crew, even the sounds of Sonic and his friends filled the air around her.

Soon, she was forced through the doorway, and what she saw would undoubtly shock her; Callous and Deity Novagod were both standing in front of her, but with their backs turned to her, but that wasn't what would be shocking. What was shocking, however, was who they were glaring at.

Brick and Metal Sonic.

"NO!" Jill took charge this time, running forward and standing between the two evil ones and the two ones who she held dear. Even then, she felt weak at her knees at the sight of Callous and Deity.

However, both Callous and Deity didn't even seem to notice Jill, as

both of them began walking past her, approaching both Brick and Metal, both of them already looking weakened.

As the two walked past her, however, Jill would see something utterly terrifying; what amounted to a sea of blood was where the two had previously stood, but floating in the water were a few things she would recognize.

Striker's bat, and Jack's harmonica.

...they died... because you couldn't stop them... a dark voice whispered.

"…no…" Jill uttered, shaking her head. Then she held it. "…no, this can't be real!"

...it will be... the voice uttered. *...if you do not prevent it yourself...*

At that point, Callous furiously knocked Brick to the ground, and Deity, with a couple of swift movements, had sliced Metal's arms off his body, before kicking him down on the ground. As Callous conjured a scythe, preparing to cleave the bull in two, Deity formed a blade of pure darkness, which he pointed at the Metallix.

...to conquer one fear, to suppress the other... can you do it?

Something must have snapped in Jill, because after that, all her fears were gone.

Instead, they were replaced with a strong fury and determination. Out of nowhere, Jill took out her own sword and charged blindly after Callous and Deity, forgetting all about Brick and Metal.

Throughout this, she gave out an unreal battle cry.

Both Callous and Deity stopped in their tracks, as they silently looked at Jill, before turning away from their respective targets. Then, both of them rushed at Jill as well, with what amounted to a wave of Corruption racing behind them, threatening to swallow Jill whole.

But Jill kept going.

Inside herself, she felt an amazing strength she had only heard in tales at home. The strength of a warrior…

Now that she had this strength, she was NOT going to back down.

She raised her sword, and in a blinding glow, she sliced away the tidal wave of Corruption behind her enemies, before she turned to Callous and Deity.

" *Leave!"* she commanded; her voice resonating throughout the void with a godly echo.

As she yelled that, both Callous and Deity stopped, looking at her with surprised eyes. However, while Callous grudgingly dropped her own scythe, Deity suddenly rushed at her again, his blade giving out an ungodly dark glow.

Jill deflected it with her blade without flinching. *"I gave you a chance,"* she said, *"but I won't give you another one!"* With that, she thrust her blade forward, intending to stab him while her blade started to glow brighter.

As she stabbed forward, the blade pierced right through Deity's body, and judging from his expression, that did the trick. He slowly stretched his arm out towards Jill, but it fell limp, just as he did.

...tell me... what do you fear...?

As the dark voice whispered that, all around Jill, things began changing. Even though she was silent, Callous began writhing and screaming in pain, as she slowly began fading into darkness, and the sea of blood was slowly wiped away, the harmonica and baseball bat included.

" *I fear…nothing,"* Jill hissed.

...then you pass.

At that point, everything around Jill exploded in a cascade of light, and before she knew it, she was back in the cave, still sitting like she had been earlier, and still looking at Tails Doll, who was looking quite innocent, now.

Jill shook out of it, feeling a little incoherent a moment until she looked at Tails Doll. "…that was interesting," she muttered. "I didn't expect that you could do that Tails Doll."

" *I usually never get the chance to do it.* " Tails Doll said, as he giggled. " *But... wow, you actually got through, and you got over your fears as well! There's not many who got that right on the first try!* "

"…I'm pretty surprised that I did it too," Jill said, though she smiled. "I didn't know I had that kind of strength."

" *And here I thought that we'd have to do a repeat!* " Tails Doll said with a smile. " *Oh, I can't wait to see how Big Bro's going to react when he finds out that you did it so soon!* "

"Speaking of which, where is he?" Jill asked.

" *Oh, Big Bro decided to do things a bit differently, today.* " Tails Doll said with a giggle. " *He's going on a field trip!* "

"A field trip?" Then a thought hit her. *Oh, maybe he went to see one of the Gaia temples,* she guessed. After giving Tails Doll a shrug, she stood up. "Listen," she said. "…is it okay if I took a bath in the river? I kinda need one…"

" *...okay.* " Tails Doll nodded. " *But don't take too long; Big Bro expects you to keep training afterwards.* "

"I won't take long," Jill said with a nod, picking up her satchel and taking off outside the cave into the woods.

Chapter 48

CHAPTER FOURTY-EIGHT

"AAAH!" At the clubhouse, someone suddenly exited their bedroom in a panic, as he pressed himself against the wall out in the hall, looking in his room. "Wha- where'd you come from?" Jack uttered.

" *...I'm not even going to question* how *I got in that kind of position...* " a certain robotic voice muttered, as Metal Sonic stepped out of the room, giving a nod to Jack. " *Good morning, at least.* "

"Jack, what was with all that screamin—HOLY!" Brick flinched once he came to the scene. "You're here AGAIN?" he asked Metal. "What is it *this* time?"

" *Good morning to you, too.* " Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. " *Since you're here, do you think you could bring the others who live here over to this location?* "

"...what do you want, here?" Jack uttered, as he tilted his head.

" *...I figured that you'd want to come along on a field trip, that's all.* " Metal shrugged.

"A field trip?" Brick asked suspiciously. "Metal…I just can't figure you out."

" *Don't bother trying, then.* " Metal said, as he glanced at Brick. " *Now, are you going to get your friends here, or not?* "

"...what kind of field trip is it going to be?" Jack inquired.

" *Well, it'll be more or less an educational trip... and the information we'll be learning of is vital, so I hope that those who come along have gotten enough sleep.* " Metal replied.

"…fine," Brick replied, walking off to wake the others.

After awhile, the rest of the children came up curiously, with Milo

and Buddy hesitating around Metal. Then Brick returned with Proxy and Whisker as well.

"Okay, let me get this straight; ye`re takin' us on a field trip?" Whisker uttered after Metal had told the newcomers what he had planned for them.

" *Correct. I have a gut feeling that some of you could benefit from this trip.* " Metal nodded.

"And how do we know that this isn't a trap?" Proxy inquired, as he raised an eyebrow.

" *Why would I bother with one?* " Metal responded. " *If I wanted you dead, I'd have killed you all right now.* "

"Strangely enough, you have a point," Brick admitted. "So, you gonna sweep us away to this 'field trip' or do we get a hint of what it is, first?"

" *...actually, I'll sweep you away. It'll make things a bit more surprising.* " At that point, everyone in the hallway suddenly vanished, leaving the hall empty.

"...hello?" However, once they were gone, Natal walked down the hall, looking curiously around her. "Weird... could've sworn that I heard something..." Shrugging, she went to the kitchen. "The kids'll probably wake up when they smell breakfast..."

Somewhere in a completely different place the group popped up. It was in a desert-like region in front of a tall temple.

Brick was trying to compose himself after that. "Why doesn't anyone give a warning before they do that?" he grumbled.

" *Because it takes the suspense out of it.* " Metal shrugged, as he approached the temple, looking up at it.

"Woah..." Jack uttered, as he looked up at the massive temple. "Is that...?"

" *Yes...* " Metal nodded. " *...a Gaia Temple.* "

"A Gaia temple?" Striker asked. "…like from the Professor's story about Sonic turning into that Were-wolf thing?"

"…now that I think about it, yeah," Brick answered Striker. *What in the world is Metal doing here?* Brick wondered in thought, figuring that his question would be answered without having to ask it aloud.

" *Come along, now.* " Metal said, as he motioned for the group to follow him, before walking towards the temple's entrance.

"...guess we'd better follow him, then." Proxy muttered, as he began walking after the Metallix.

Everyone did so, and they entered into a large dark chamber. There was a long path leading up to a platform, and the whole place was lit up by pillars with ancient-looking, greenish-blue glowing markings.

"Whoa!" Rudy uttered; finding that his voice echoed in the large temple.

"Wow, this place be huge!" Whisker noted, as he looked around in awe.

"I didn't think it'd be *this* big!" Jack uttered in complete awe.

Metal, however, stopped by the platform, observing it calmly. *...I wonder if...* he thought, as he walked on the platform, taking out his Chaos Emerald.

Brick simply watched Metal, waiting to see what would happen.

...nothing. Metal thought after a while, before glancing at the Chaos Emerald. *Bringing him out isn't gonna be that simple, I take it...* Sighing, he raised the Chaos Emerald up in the air, focusing its energy so that it gave out a brilliant green glow. *Now, come on out...*

The platform mimicked the glow of the emerald, but other then that, nothing happened.

At least, not to the group, but Metal could hear a voice within his mind.

… if you wish to summon me, then you mustn't use one of the servers of seven Chaos…

...is that so? Metal thought, as he placed the emerald on the ground, before raising his arm again. *Then... how about this?* At that point, his arm began taking on a bright, green glow.

… from where did you get my power?

On the platform in front of Metal above there was a mural, which was consumed with a bright light.

"What's going on?" Rudy asked.

No one answered him. From out of the mural, a transparent figure emerged and fluttered down to Metal to meet face to face with him. It looked like a light maroon-colored dog with many tufts of white fur, bearing very tiny fairy wings.

Looking at Metal curiously was the manifestation of Light Gaia.

Or more casually referred to as Chip.

...from where do you think I got it? Metal responded to the small figure. *Copying data is one of my many specialties. But, let's cut to the chase.* Then, the Metallix folded his arms. *He said that to gain knowledge on Purity and Corruption... we should seek out you.*

I see, Chip responded, fluttering past Metal and looking upon the rest of the group, who gawked at him.

"Are you…you're not Light Gaia, are you?" Brick asked. He had seen photos from Tails…this creature surely looked like.

"Yes, I am," Chip spoke. "Just call me Chip."

"...Chip?" Jack uttered, as he looked at Chip with wide eyes. "Woah..."

" *I brought them along, so they'd gain some form of understanding, regarding the subject matter.* " Metal said, as he glanced at Chip. " *I hope that it won't cause any complications?* "

"None," Chip replied. "Everyone should have a seat; I don't know how long it will be."

"Time out," Brick said, making a T gesture with his hands. "Now, if I'm right, you're a force that's been recreating Earth or so, according to the Gaia Scrolls, right? How can a powerful force like you be summoned just like that; just by a simple gesture from him?" And he pointed at Metal.

"I'll explain," Chip said. "Just sit down."

"...alright, then." Proxy nodded, as he sat down, observing Chip. Soon, the rest of them sat down as well, with Metal joining the group, looking up at Chip.

"Well, I know you guys would like to know right away, so I won't make it long," Chip said. "The best answer there is to say is that Purity and Corruption are evolved powers that originated from mine and Dark Gaia's essences."

" *So they're extensions of your own powers...* " Metal muttered, as he folded his arms whilst nodding.

"…no kidding?" Brick uttered, visibly surprised by this. "You're saying that Brownie has the same powers as YOU do?"

"Loosely," Chip replied.

" *Loosely?* " Metal uttered. " *Does that mean that she only has control over some of the abilities you possess?* "

"It just means that her powers are more unique than mine," Chip said. "I don't think she could piece together the entire Earth if it were to break to pieces…not alone anyway."

"That would be kind of a stretch..." Proxy said with a nod.

" *But there is something that has made me think...* " Metal muttered, as he tilted his head. " *...why Jill, of all people? Why was she picked to keep a hold of Purity?* "

"Because her Mom requested it," Chip answered, turning away.

"And I can't get into the details about her; they're just too complicated."

"Figures..." Proxy sighed.

" *...then what about Novagod?* " Metal muttered, as he looked at Chip. " *Is his story with Corruption too complicated, as well?* "

"Deity Novagod," Chip murmured, turning back around to face them. "He resulted in someone who had been affected the time Dark Gaia was released. But something spontaneous happened that wasn't expected. One of Dark Gaia's minions tried to possess a Mobian bat, but he had an unreal will. His will was so strong, but he also had a dark heart to begin with. The minion that tried to possess him really did something like merge with him. Dark intentions were twisted around with Dark Gaia's powers, and…became Corruption. Thus, Deity Novagod was reborn to what he is now."

"…Deity invented Corruption by the sound of it," Brick remarked.

"That's exactly what happened," Chip said.

" *Hrm...* " Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. " *...then I guess that Goddess was the one who invented Purity?* "

"Well…yes and no," Chip answered. "Goddess did invent Purity, but she gave up her life to pass it down to her daughter, whom she believed would be a strong enough warrior for it. So while Goddess invented it…she doesn't have the rights to use it like Jill does."

" *Really...* " Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes.

"...so, the mean vampire began making Jill's life miserable, because Goddess allowed Jill to use Purity?" Jack guessed.

"Yes," Chip said. "In fact, Deity is aware of all this knowledge. He knew that Purity originated from me, and Corruption from Dark Gaia. He took advantage of the fact that Jill knew nothing, and hoped to destroy the power she had."

Well, good riddance that he`s locked in that black emerald, now!" Whisker said.

" *...but I doubt that it'll last.* " Metal muttered, as he glanced up at Chip. " *Yesterday, Jill had a nightmare, and I think it signifies that Novagod's release is imminent. Am I right?* "

Chip nodded. "Jill was not strong enough back then to completely destroy Deity, so the only thing she could do was momentarily lock him away. Though I can't predict the exact time he will be free, I can assure you that it is uncomfortably close."

"So he's going to continue making Jill's life miserable?" Jack uttered.

"No." Metal replied sharply. *"When he's released, he'll be destroyed once and for all."*

Brick noticed Metal's harsh reaction. "And why are you so quick to think that?" he asked.

"Because," Chip answered instead. "Deity Novagod is the one who murdered Sonic the Hedgehog."

Mouths hung open from the children.

"...he... he WHAT?" Jack yelled in sheer terror.

"Shocking, I know." Metal nodded.

Brick couldn't believe the news, or the fact that Metal was indifferent to it; like he already knew. "...You've got to be kidding me," he croaked. "...The Professor spent his entire life..."

"...the Professor never even told us how Sonic died," Striker said. "He never told us anything beyond Sonic's adventures with Dark Gaia..."

"Maybe the children weren't told anything then," Chip said. "But Sonic's death started a chain reaction of many bad things to come...I'm sure Tails was so traumatized by what happened that he didn't want to dwell on it at all."

"...all this time..." Brick uttered. "...it was that vampire."

"...and he's not going to get away with it." Metal uttered coldly, as he glared at the ground. *"When he escapes his prison, his days are numbered. He won't find any safe place to hide, and he will be destroyed."*

"...ain't Metal Sonic supposed t' be th' villain?" Whisker uttered, as he looked at Metal with a dumbfounded look.

"Well, he has his reasons for bearing that kind of grudge against Novagod..." Proxy muttered.

"Metal," Brick spoke. "Did Brownie know about this?"

"About what? The fact that Deity killed Sonic?" Metal noted, before looking back at Brick. *"...not until recently."* he said.

"Hm," Brick eyed Metal suspiciously again. "...how did the two of you find out about it?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." Metal responded, before glancing up at Chip. *And neither are you; I'd like to consider it a secret between me and Jill,* he told the spirit, so the others couldn't hear him.

Chip understood, and made no reaction implying that something was said between the mental link. "If that is all you want to know, then I should be returning back to my dwelling," Chip said.

"There is one more thing..." At that point, Metal showed the markings on his hands to Chip. *"These markings. Jill said that they symbolize concentrated hatred... so why did they appear on us after we cured* Goddess *, and is there a way to remove them?"*

"They appeared on Jill because she bears an intense hate toward Callous and Deity to what they did to her," Chip answered. "Why they appeared on you...well, that's up to you to figure out." Chip then turned and started returning toward the mural. "...unfortunately, the only way to remove the markings, is forgiveness."

"...forgiveness?" Metal uttered, as he watched Chip. *"You mean that we're... expected to forgive them, for what they've done?"*

"It takes a lot of strength to forgive someone for something drastically horrible," Chip said. "Only that strength is strong enough to heal the wounds that were marked on you." The mural was consumed in light again, and Chip glanced back. "Anything else before I'm gone?"

"...no." Metal nodded, as he stood up. *"That'll be all."*

Chip regarded a nod to them. "It was nice meeting you guys," he said. "Take care of yourselves." With that, he disappeared inside the light, and it faded away from the mural, leaving the group alone.

Brick stood up, along with the kids. "...well, there were some shocking tid-bits there," he mumbled.

"I'll say..." Proxy nodded, as he and Whisker stood up as well.

"...well, my apologies for dragging you all out of bed *so early in the morning."* Metal said, as he turned to look at the group. *"We'll just head outside, and I'll take you back to your clubhouse."* As he said that, a tendril shot out from his back, picking up the Chaos Emerald he had placed away before summoning Chip, and retracting it into the Metallix's body.

"...I hope Natal isn't worried about us," Milo squeaked, while he and the rest of the children walked down toward the entrance of the temple.

"Oh, I'm sure she won't be alarmed. We were only gone, for, what, half an hour? " Metal said with a brief chuckle, as he approached the group. *"Now, let's-"*

Metal could feel something strange come over him then, which caused the interruption.

Striker turned and looked at him. "Is something wrong Metal?"

Blinking, Metal placed a hand against his head. *"...n-nothing."* he muttered. *"Must've been my imagination..."*

Since when did a robot have an imagination? In his head, it sounded strangely like his own voice and his own thoughts, yet... darker.

Hn? Blinking, Metal looked around him, wondering what that voice was. *Who's there?* he thought.

"...are you sure that you're alright?" Proxy uttered.

"...I'm fine." Metal reiterated. *"Let's just get you people home."* Then, the group vanished.

"Breakfast is getting cold..." Natal muttered, as she sat by the kitchen table, with lots of food already placed on the table. "...where are they, anyway?"

At that point, the group suddenly reappeared in the kitchen, which of course startled the bullfrog. "Eh? Where did-"

"Food!" Jack cheered, as he immediately ran to the table, taking a seat.

"We're starved!" Rudy exclaimed, following Jack's example.

Striker and Milo slowly took their own seats as well, while Brick just stood there.

"...sorry about that, Natal," Brick said.

"...wait, I'm confused." Natal uttered, as she pointed at Metal, who had turned away from the group. "What's he doing here?"

"We were on a... trip... with him." Proxy noted, as he gave the Metallix a brief nod.

Metal, however, was absorbed in his own thoughts. *Alright, who the hell is this?* he thought.

This time, Metal got no response from the other voice in his head.

Hearing the silence, Metal sighed, before glancing back at the group. *"I'll just let myself out, now. Tails Doll will probably be back shortly."* Then, he vanished.

"...strange..." Proxy muttered, as he glanced at where Metal had stood.

"Maybe he's still shaken up about what he learned about those markings," Brick said. "It's the only thing he really reacted to..."

"...maybe so." Proxy nodded, as he glanced out the window. *Or... was it something else?* he thought.

Once Metal returned to the cave, he'd see that Jill was gone. Although, Chaos was standing at the mouth of the cave, and he simply glanced back to see Metal.

"...Chaos. " Metal uttered in surprise, as he looked at the water creature. *"I thought you were asleep in your chambers down below."* Then, he looked around. *"Where's Jill and Tails Doll?"*

Chaos pointed in two different directions. One direction pointed toward the insides of the cave, and another pointed out into the wilderness. Since Chaos couldn't communicate any more than that, it was up to Metal to figure out who was in the cave and who had gone out.

"...right." Metal said, before sighing. Tails *Doll, do you read?* he transmitted.

"...BIG BROOOOOOO!" At that point, from within the cave, an orange blur flew right at the Metallix, quickly perching itself on Metal's head. *"Big Bro, you should have been there! She got through the test on her first try!"*

"Did she, now?" Metal chuckled. " *She really is showing progress. But where is she?"*

"...she said something about taking a bath." Tails Doll replied, as he shrugged.

Again, Chaos pointed outside into the wilderness, signifying that Jill

had gone out there.

"...well, we should get back to training, ASAP. " Metal noted, as he turned to leave the cave, when Tails Doll pulled him back. *"...what?"*

"It's not nice to peek on someone when they're bathing, Big Bro ." Tails Doll said matter-of-factly, which led Metal to look at the doll with a baffled look.

"...I'm not even going to question that." Metal muttered, as he glanced back out the cave. "Well, hopefully, she'll be done soon."

Eventually, they saw someone walking through the brush, carrying a soft tune with a melodious voice. It turned out to be Jill, (luckily full dressed) and she looked cleaner than before, but her hair was still wet. When she reached the open toward the mouth of the cave, she stopped her singing to see the three of them. "Oh, you're back," she said, spotting Metal.

"I had business to take care of." Metal said with a nod to Jill, before glancing at Tails Doll. *"Ready to go back?"*

"Alright..." Tails Doll nodded, before waving to Jill. *"Good luck against Callous, Jill!"* he said, before Metal snapped his fingers, warping the small plushie away.

"I'm guessing it was visiting the Gaia temple, wasn't it?" Jill asked.

" *Right you are."* Metal nodded. *"I decided to bring along some of your friends from the clubhouse, though. Hope you don't mind that."*

Jill was stunned. "You did?" That was interesting. "Well, what were you able to find out?"

"Well..." Metal said, as he sat down. *"...where do I begin?"*

Then, he began explaining to Jill what Chip had told him and the others earlier, including the origin of Deity and the significance of the markings, but he ommited the part about the voice he had heard

before leaving the temple.

"...then, I told them that *Tails Doll would be back shortly, and came back here."* he finished, looking up at the ewe.

Once Metal was done, Jill was amazed. "...that's incredible!" she finally said. "To think that it all had been apart of Sonic's past...it's just...a strange play of destiny or fate...or something..."

She looked at the markings on her hands. "...forgiveness?" she said. "...but how could I ever forgive them?" her mood changed from being amazed to anger, turning away from Metal.

"You're asking the wrong person there, Jill." Metal muttered, as he looked at his own hands. *"...but Chip said that it takes a lot of strength to forgive someone for something horrible they've done; strength which could remove the markings."* Then, he closed his eyes. *"...then I guess these marks are here to stay, then."*

Jill clenched her hands. "...but if I'm not strong enough to remove the markings," she said. "Then how can I be strong enough to fight Callous and Deity?"

Metal, however, didn't reply. As Jill had said those words, the Metallix had began contemplating them. *...so even with combat training, unless we forgive them for what they've done-* However, he mentally smacked himself before finishing the thought. *No, don't go there.*

Then, he looked back at Jill. *"It's probably just strength on a mental level; symbolic stuff, or something."* he said, before standing up. *"Besides, it's not like these markings are going to inconvenience you. We just need to focus on training for the upcoming battles."*

But what if she's right Metal? hissed the other voice in his mind. *What if the only way to be all powerful with Purity is to be...pure? Free of sins like wrath?*

"...yeah, maybe you're right," Jill said.

"Hm." Metal nodded to Jill, as he closed his eyes. *Then explain to me why her powers are stronger when her emotions are in flux.* he thought in response to the voice. *Just who are you, anyway?*

Don't you know? I'm you. Besides, you watched her transform with ease...do you even know what she did to do that?

"Metal?" Jill noticed him acting strange and tilted her head.

Do I look like a mind reader? he thought, ignoring Jill for the time being. *And there's no way that you're me; why would a machine have a quarrel with himself in his own mind? It's pure and simple logic.*

Well, you haven't been doing very logical things lately...

In the meantime Jill grew more concerned, yet she didn't bother Metal for some reason.

And what's that supposed to mean? Metal was beginning to grow annoyed with this voice, as became clear on the outside, with the Metallix folding his arms and glaring to the side, still not acknowleding Jill.

Last we checked, robots didn't break down wanting to cry or hug a girl because of tensity in the air.

Metal's eyes widened. *...how the hell did you learn about that?*

As I said, I'm you. I just know.

...get out of my head. Metal thought, as he clenched his hands into fists. *Right now.*

Deny it as much as you want...but you've never quite felt what it was like to be cared about for once, until now. You sure you want to push that away?

...push it away? What do you mean?

You're distancing yourself from her...because you know that she could be gone from your life again. Just when she wants to find you a purpose in life too...

...you're not making any sense. I'm a machine; why should I care if she disappears? When Callous and Deity *are out of the picture, I'll proceed with taking over the world, anyway!* At this point, Metal turned away from Jill. *And even she doesn't know of a better purpose for me.*

You were awfully quick to judge that in my opinion. No answer to a good questions pops up out of nowhere, and if you gave her a chance, she could find something...besides, it doesn't have to be a thing or a goal you find meaning it.

It can always be a someone you find meaning in too.

...someone? Metal blinked at hearing that. *Just... what are you implying, here?*

Take a good look. She hasn't questioned you as much as the others have, because somehow she understands you...she somehow put her trust in you. She even saved you after that thunderstorm.

Could just anyone save a machine plotting world dominance like that?

... Metal was silent. He had no comeback to that whatsoever.

Think about it for awhile...

"...Metal, is something wrong?" Jill asked.

" *...n-nothing.* " Metal uttered, without looking at Jill. *"Let's... just get started with the training."*

Jill knew it wasn't just 'nothing,' but knowing Metal he'd just keep it to himself until he saw it fit to tell her. "...okay," she said, nodding.

"...let's go to the spring. Now that the storm's over..." After saying this, Metal turned around, before stopping, looking at Jill. Right after that, however, he moved past her, out of the cave.

Chaos had been watching, and when Jill gave him a questionable glance, he shrugged.

... *maybe it was something else Light Gaia told him that he didn't tell me,* she thought, following Metal.

As he walked towards the spring, Metal turned his right arm into a blade, as he observed it. *...just what was that voice suggesting? That I become friends with her, or something?* he thought, before closing his eyes. *Like that would even be possible...*

Seeing Metal turning his arm into a blade, she brought out her own holy blade, getting ready for any sparring to ensue.

"...alright, are you ready?" Metal uttered, as he turned around, pointing the blade at Jill. *"Charge."*

Chapter 49

CHAPTER FOURTY-NINE

Another day... Wiper thought, as he was looking out the window of the HQ, with a cup of coffee in his hand. *Wonder if the others are up, yet...*

Charmy walked in sooner or later, holding a cup of coffee of his own when he spotted Wiper. "Ah, I knew there was someone who made the coffee this morning," he chuckled, taking a seat by the snake. "How are you this morning, Wiper?"

"Can't complain, really." Wiper said, as he took a sip of coffee, before glancing at Charmy. "The others are still asleep, I take it?"

"Yep," Charmy said. "But it's nice to know everyone slept peacefully after all those hectic things went on the past two days."

"Yeah..." Wiper nodded, as he closed his eyes.

"Good morning, gentlemen." At that point, someone else walked into the room; the GUN Commander, holding her own cup of coffee. "Thanks again for letting me stay over, Captain Charmy." she said, as she took a seat as well.

"No problem," Charmy said after sipping his own coffee.

"Oh, I have to ask..." the Commander began, as she glanced at Wiper. "Where's Jillian Condit?"

"...she's out training." Wiper replied, as he took another sip of coffee.

"...really." Nodding, the Commander looked out the window. "And when do you suppose she'll return?"

"We aren't really sure," Charmy replied. "But hopefully soon."

"Hm." Nodding, the Commander glanced at Wiper again, noticing the markings on his wound. "...how did that happen?" she asked.

"...it's a long story." Wiper said with a wave of his hand.

"And boy, is it quite a story…" Charmy murmured. He was trying to ignore what Wiper's scars reminded him of, while at the same time, he was a bit shaken to think about the possibilities it made him wonder.

"Really..." the Commander nodded, as she took another sip from her coffee. "You'll have to share that story later on, then." she added, before glancing back at Wiper. "Oh, yeah... I forgot to ask about the GUN Agents. Why're they here?"

"...that's also a long story." Wiper noted, as he placed the cup on a table.

"So much has happened here Commander," Charmy said. "We wouldn't even know where to start."

"...I suppose I've been out of the loop for a long time." the Commander chuckled, as she looked back out the window. "You'll have to tell me what's happened later; it's too early to start explaining things."

"...maybe so." Wiper nodded, before he glanced at the Commander. "Say, did you see anyone else waking up?"

"Nope." she quickly responded. "Guess they're still asleep..."

"Perhaps I should go check on Hunter and Ani," Charmy said, getting up.

"I'll come along." Wiper said, as he gave Charmy a nod.

"You two go check on them." the commander said with a smile, as she took another sip of coffee. "I'll just sit and enjoy the view... it's a good view; a lot better than the one in my cell."

Meanwhile, Boomer was just now stirring and waking up, but she yawned without opening her eyes.

"...you awake?" she heard Newt utter drowsily.

"…just a little bit," she muttered.

"...same here." Newt responded, as he let out a yawn of his own.

Boomer still didn't open her eyes, but she smiled as she snuggled up to him. "Well, I don't want to get up," she mumbled.

"...yeah, we don't have to just yet..." Newt mumbled in return, as he turned his head to face Boomer, even though his eyes were still not opened as well.

"…are you glad that your Commander's back safe and sound?" Boomer asked.

"Yeah..." Newt nodded, as he opened his eyes slightly. "...but I'm gladder that *everyone's* safe and sound... especially you."

Boomer smiled even more, opening her eyes a little herself and looking up at Newt. She didn't know what to say to that…but then again, maybe she didn't have to say anything.

Newt was silent as well, as he gently stroked Boomer's cheek with a smile.

She blushed shyly when he did that.

Charmy and Wiper discovered that Hunter was sitting in a seat, snoozing with his head on the same bed that his daughter was asleep on. Charmy couldn't keep in his snickering, thinking that the wolf looked a little goofy while he was sleeping; especially when his ear twitched every now and then.

Wiper, however, didn't snicker at this sight, but he did smile just a bit; it was a cute sight, to say the least.

"I'm guessing Sage went to her own bed," Charmy said. "Usually she's here watching Ani, but I don't see her in here."

"Hm..." Wiper nodded, as he folded his arms. "Should we wake Hunter up, Charmy?"

"Let's do that," Charmy said. "But first…a little fun." From nowhere,

Charmy brought out a feather with a mischievous grin and approached Hunter.

"Oh, you've got to be..." Wiper muttered, as he closed his eyes, as he couldn't help but smirk at the thought of it.

Charmy tip-toed next to Hunter and tickled the feather in his ear; causing it to twitch in response. Every now and then, he paused so that he tickled Hunter just enough to keep him from waking up and then he'd snicker again from behind a hand.

"You know, for someone your age, you sure don't act your age." Wiper noted, as he shook his head.

"Heh, you don't know anything," Charmy replied, after having tickled Hunter again. "I'll never act my age; just ask Tails or Cream."

The minute Charmy stuck the feather in to tickle again, a hand snatched him by the wrist, surprising him.

"That's getting *really* irritating," Hunter grumbled, cracking an eye open to glare at Charmy.

"...good morning, Hunter." Wiper said with a brief nod to the wolf, before leaning against the wall. "I was beginning to wonder what took you so long to wake up."

"Like I told you, I'm a night person," Hunter mumbled. "I couldn't sleep until around midnight…" While standing up, he had a grave expression. "…tonight's going to be a full moon. I can tell."

"Hm?" Charmy was taken off guard by what Hunter said.

"...a full moon." Wiper muttered. "In that case, you should stay inside today. And stay away from the windows."

"I know," Hunter said, at which he then looked at Ani. "…but I'm worried about her."

Charmy looked at Hunter a moment before he made a couple connections. "I see…I'm guessing that you undergo a transformation similar to hers on the full moon, correct?"

"That's right," Hunter said.

"…and you're worried that the full moon might wake her up."

"My point exactly," Hunter said again.

"Hrm..." Wiper muttered, as he let out a sigh. "And Sage still hasn't found a way to help her..."

Charmy rubbed his chin. "Well now, let's not give up hope…I'm sure we'll figure something out."

"I highly doubt we'll figure out anything before tonight," Hunter said.

"Well, how bad can her awakening be?" Charmy said. "It wasn't so bad when she awoke when Johnny and Callous came to visit."

"On my transformation at first, I have very little control of my actions because beast instincts are running through me at an alarming rate. It isn't until after awhile that I finally regain control of myself, but that's usually after being a Werewolf for…probably several hours; about 5 hours if I were to narrow it down," Hunter explained. "My Werewolf is not the same as Ani's, as she demonstrated…but I'm sure she still has the gene for it. If my transformation is what I described…imagine what hers will be like under the light of the full moon."

"…I can see your point," Charmy nodded.

"...but how can we prevent that from happening?" Wiper inquired, as he glanced at Hunter.

"Probably the same way I prevent mine," Hunter supposed, "By not letting a single moon beam touch me. I remain in the dark to keep from transforming, and it's worked."

"...I hate to suggest this, but..." Wiper began, as he glanced at Ani. "...we could move her and a mattress down in the basement. There shouldn't be any way for the moon to shine down on her down there."

"My best bet is that we'll have to get Sage's permission to do that,"

Hunter said. "As much as I don't want to admit it, she's in charge of Ani according to Jill."

"First, we should find Sage, then." Wiper nodded, as he gave Hunter a nod. "Let's see if she's in her room."

"Go ahead Hunter; I'll stay with her if you're really that worried about her," Charmy assured.

"…alright," Hunter said, leaving out the door.

With a nod, Wiper followed Hunter out of the room. Soon enough, both of them would stop by Sage's room, but when Wiper opened the door, both of them would realize something; the raven was not in her room. "...is she awake, already?"

Hunter looked around. "Sage?" he called out.

No reply.

"...if you're looking for Sage, she's on the roof." they'd hear another female voice say behind them; Queen.

"Oh, she is?" Hunter asked, turning to her. "Why is she up there?"

"Apparently, she decided to spend the night meditating." Queen replied, as she glanced upwards. "She told me so, before I went to bed."

"...well, that's helpful. Thanks, Queen." Wiper said with a nod, before he went down the hall. "Come on, Hunter."

"Wait..." Queen uttered, as she glanced at Hunter. "...why do you need to see Sage, anyway?"

"Because if Ani can become a Werewolf, than we need to make sure the moon doesn't touch her," Hunter replied to Queen. "Tonight's going to be a full moon."

"...I see." Queen nodded, as she folded her arms. "Go on, then, Hunter; Wiper's probably waiting for you."

Hunter went ahead following Wiper down the hall.

Soon, the two got on the roof, and sure enough, the raven was sitting there, her eyes closed, and her mind at peace. "...you want Ani down in the basement?" she uttered before they even had a chance to ask her.

"Yep," Hunter replied nonchalantly; since he was so used to it.

"Hmm... the full moon could be a problem." Nodding, Sage turned her ear so she could see Wiper and Hunter. "Very well. But I'll stay by her to try and find some way to help her out, just so we're clear on that."

"Clear as crystal." Wiper said, as he hissed.

"Thank you Sage," Hunter said.

"Don't mention it." Sage chuckled, as she looked away from the two. "...it's a wonderful morning, isn't it?"

"Sure," Hunter murmured, although he had more important things to think about than the view of the morning.

"...well, I don't want to keep you hanging around for no reason." Sage chuckled, as she waved one of her wings at them. "Go and get some breakfast, okay? I'll just enjoy the view a bit more."

"Guess we should..." Wiper muttered, as he gave Hunter a nod. "Come on."

"Alright," Hunter said, turning and leaving.

"Guys, you know that we have to see the Professor now, right?" Brick said, looking at the children gathered in front of him.

"Yeah," Striker said. "We wanted to see him so we could get a chance to talk to Captain Charmy and check on them."

"But that means we'll have to tell the Professor what we found out,

right?" Milo guessed.

"Yeah," Brick said.

"And that means that we've got to tell him that we went with Metal... right?" Jack inquired.

"Yep," Brick answered. "Although I solved our travel problem. Take a look in the other room guys."

The kids did so, and they'd discover a cool thing.

Different Extreme gears were lined up in the room, all for each of them and even one for Natal.

"COOL!" they exclaimed, rushing to them.

Striker picked up one that was brown and turquoise blue with purple fins. "This is awesome!"

Jack picked one up that was red and a light shade of gray, with yellow fins. "This is so cool! Did you make these by yourself, Brick?"

"Yeah I did," Brick said. "Once the Professor showed me how to make one properly, I was able to make more in a matter of minutes."

Rudy's was a dark blue one with brown fins. "You're the best Brick!" he said. "I'm not even sure that the Captain will let me have a gear, but thanks!"

Milo's was a cream-colored one with various oranges mixed in. "...I really like it," he said, smiling.

That left only a few Gears left, one of them being a dark-green one with black fins, likely meant for Natal. "So... can we ride these to the Professor's, Brick?" Jack asked.

"Hey, are you guys going on a trip?" At that point, Tails Doll fluttered to the group, watching them and their Extreme Gears.

"Yeah, I was planning on that," Brick answered Jack first, before he turned to Tails Doll. "We're going to head down to the Professor's

shop." Walking over to the left over gears, he picked up the one that was orange, black and cream-colored; same color as his boots, which implied that gear was his. "You wanna come with us Tails Doll?"

"...do you even need an answer to that? Count me in!" Tails Doll said happily.

"Then let's go!" Jack said with a huge smile. "Last one there does the dishes for the next week!"

"Now hold on, we have to get Natal, Proxy and Whisker too," Brick said.

"Aw!" All the kids groaned, but no one argued.

"You rang?" As he said that, Natal approached the group as well, lifting her glasses away from her eyes. "What's up?"

"Look! Look!" Rudy urged, pointing at Natal's gear. "Brick made you one too, Natal!"

"...he made me a-" Natal uttered, as she walked to see what Rudy pointed at, when she noticed the Extreme Gear. Blinking, she nearly dropped her glasses at that sight, before looking at Brick. "...for me?"

"Yep," Striker said, smiling.

Looking to and from the Extreme Gear, Natal couldn't help but smile as well. "...thanks."

"There's a gathering out in the hall, and we weren't invited?" they heard Proxy chuckle, as he and Whisker walked down the hall towards them.

"Oh, hey guys," Brick said. "I made some Extreme Gears...and we're going to head down to the Professor's shop to check up."

"Is that so..." Proxy noted, as he nodded. "Well, I'm sure you guys will be fine on your own."

"Hn?" Jack uttered, as he looked at the two of them. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Well, someone`s got t' look after th' clubhouse while ye`re gone, right?" Whisker said in response.

"I guess that makes sense," Brick said. With that, he walked out of the room. "See you later then. C'mon guys."

"WOOHOOO!" they cheered, running out.

"See you around." Natal said with a wave to the two machines, before she followed the others.

"...what a crew." Proxy chuckled, as he and Whisker began walking down the hall again. "Well, let's see if we can't find any movies that we can see while they're out."

"Hopefully one wi' lots o' action!" Whisker said with a hearty laugh.

Outside, Brick had already jumped aboard his gear. "Like you guys said; LAST ONE THERE DOES DISHES NEXT WEEK!" and he took off.

"Hey!" Rudy called, struggling to get on his gear because of his kangaroo feet.

"Oh no, you don't!" Jack called, as he got on his own Extreme Gear, before taking off after Brick.

"Sorry, but I'm not doing those dishes." Natal chuckled, as she quickly got on her own Extreme Gear and went after Jack and Brick.

"Hey, wait up!" Tails Doll called as he flew after the others.

"You'll have to try harder; I have the most experience riding Gears than any of you!" Brick called.

"We'll see about that Brick!" Striker said.

"...c'mon guys," whined Milo, who lagged behind as usual.

"You can't expect to win that easily!" Jack laughed, as he began gaining on Brick.

"Neither should you." Natal chuckled, as she quickly moved past Jack, going up alongside Brick.

"Wait up!" Soon, Tails Doll actually flew right past the others, without even realizing it.

Brick knew the Mystic Ruins well, because he had also explored it the most compared to the others. Weaving around the trees was a simple task for him, which took Rudy and Milo off guard and Striker dodged them shakily, with Buddy in tow.

"Chao!" Buddy didn't need a gear for his wings, but he felt this was unpleasant all the more.

"Don't worry Buddy!" Striker said, clearly having fun anyway.

"Woooah!" Jack, as it turned out, also had some problems moving past the trees, but he was also having fun in spite of it.

However, surprisingly enough, Natal actually kept up with Brick, easily moving around the trees, in spite of being a relative newbie when it came to Extreme Gear.

And Tails Doll... well, he was already far out of sight, likely already at Tails' place.

But nobody knew where Tails Doll was anyway; they were too busy having fun Extreme Gear racing.

Soon they came to a clearing in the jungle, revealing a slope of boulders that looked strangely like a ramp, taking off into the air and over a waterfall.

"Yeah, THAT'S what I'm talkin' about!" Brick proclaimed, riding up the boulders and taking off into the air. Then he proceeded to perform a couple tricks and flips.

"Cool!" Rudy called out, watching him.

"Two can play at that game!" Natal called, as she shot right after Brick, flying right off the boulders, and taking to the sky, before proceeding to preform her own tricks in mid-air.

"Wow, that's awesome!" Jack exclaimed at this sight.

Milo barely made it before Rudy got excited. "C'mon guys! Let's try it too!" He said, taking off over the boulders as well.

"Yeah!" cheered Striker, following the example too.

"Whoa, w-wait a minute guys!" Milo uttered, noticing the giant waterfall.

"C'mon, Milo, it'll be alright!" Jackl laughed, as he followed the others right off the ramp.

"But I-!" However, Jack was gone before Milo had a chance to finish, and he stared at the waterfall in disdain. "...but I can't swim." Milo decided finally that he didn't want to be left behind, so he held his breath and went up the boulder reluctantly, before he finally jumped in the air.

Then he let out his breath, screaming in terror as he flew. "AHHHHHHHHHH!"

Brick finally landed on the other side on land, continuing onward and picking up speed now that he was close to reaching Tails' shop.

All of a sudden, Natal landed just about right in front of him, quickly picking up speed. "Don't assume that you've won just yet." she said with a chuckle, as she sped ahead of the bull.

"Ah, competition!" Brick chuckled. "You know, you're pretty confident for someone who's new at this!" Taking a boost, Brick ended up beside Natal nose-to-nose, focusing all he could on passing her.

While the kids tried to follow from behind. Striker looked up ahead barely seeing Natal and Brick. "Wow! They're going fast!" he said.

"CHAO!" Buddy threw in, wishing this nauseating ride would stop.

"I guess I just like the thought of winning!" Natal called back, as she also focused on getting ahead of the bull.

"Well, I guess those two don't have to do the dishes!" Jack noted.

"Hey guys! Wait up!" cried Milo far behind, who luckily didn't fall into the water like he feared he would.

Brick and Natal were too far up ahead to hear the boys, and while they were probably seconds away from Tails' Shop now, Brick had to figure out a way to gain an inch or two in front of Natal so he could win. So as a risky maneuver, he swerved right in front of her hoping to cause her to flinch and slow down.

However, she didn't slow down, as the moment Brick swerwed in front of her, she took a mighty leap over him, letting her gear go underneath Brick's. Then, just barely, she got back on the Gear, and sped ahead of the bull.

That was when they made it to Tails' Shop, halting to a stop so that the kids could catch up. This meant that Natal was the victor, and to this Brick was impressed. "Maybe I should have thought twice about making you an Extreme Gear," he chuckled jokingly.

"Who won?" Rudy asked when he made it.

"Natal did," Brick replied.

"Natal won?" Jack uttered when he caught up. "Wow, that's awesome! How'd you do it?"

"I'm an expert in espionage. Sometimes, acrobatic lessons can come in handy during a pinch." Natal responded, as she glanced at Brick with a nod.

Brick let out kind of a dry laugh, "Heh." While he was impressed with Natal, he was also secretly disappointed that he lost.

"GUYS! How do you stop this thing?" Milo screamed, whizzing past everyone and riding the Extreme Gear in circles.

"Um... don't you have to step off the accelerator-thing, Brick?" Jack

mused, as he glanced at Brick.

In the meantime, Natal looked around, until she realized something. *Wait a minute... where's...*

"I did!" Milo cried. "It won't stop!"

"...a malfunction?" Brick muttered.

"Then how are we going to get Milo off it?" Jack said, as he scratched his head.

"...I have an idea." Natal said, as she watched Milo. "Get ready; I'll get you off the board!"

"Please hurry!" Milo pleaded. "I'm trying to keep it from going into the water and I can't swim!" He shot past Brick too close for comfort, knocking the bull off his gear and onto his backside on the ground, knocking the wind out of him.

"Alright... just hang on!" At that point, Natal shot out her tongue, aiming to catch Milo with it like a lasso. *Come on, strike home...* she thought.

YOINK! Milo was plucked right off the gear with her lasso tongue, and while Milo was pulled away to safety, the gear took off like a bottle-rocket and eventually crashed through a wall in Tails' Shop.

"...oops," uttered Striker uneasily, seeing the damage the gear did to the wall.

"Oh, thank you!" Milo yelped, clinging to Natal.

"Hey, don't mention it." Natal said, as she glanced up at Tails' house. "...although I think we have some explaining to do."

"...um... Professor?" Jack called, as he tried looking up after where the Extreme Gear had crashed into his house. "Are you alright?"

The kids disembarked their own gears, and Striker and Milo joined Jack around the hole in the wall.

"Professor!" called Striker.

Rudy went and helped Brick back onto his feet, bringing him to the wreckage with the rest of them.

"...could someone tell me why an Extreme Gear just plowed through my wall, and is now currently lodged into my cupboard?" they'd hear Tails say from inside the house; remarkably, he didn't seem too riled up about it.

"Well... at least he's safe." Natal muttered, as she sighed in relief.

"Sorry Professor!" Brick called. "I think I made a slight miscalculation on one of the Gears!"

"...well, I suppose it can't be helped." Tails sighed, as he walked towards the hole in the wall, waving away some of the dust the impact had caused. "But I'll expect that the wall is repaired later on, though."

"...sorry Professor," Brick murmured again, feeling really guilty. Then he turned to Milo, "You okay little guy?"

"Yeah," Milo squeaked. "...but I'm never riding Extreme Gear again!"

"Well... you might as well come in." Tails chuckled, as he motioned for them to enter the house.

"Oh, yeah, I'm curious..." Natal uttered, as she glanced at Tails. "...is Tails Doll here?"

"Tails Doll?" Tails hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...no, he isn't. I haven't seen him since he first showed up in the ruins, to be honest."

Brick blinked hearing that. He had completely forgotten about the doll in the excitement of the race. "Should I go find him?" he asked.

"No, I'm sure he'll turn up sooner or later." Tails shrugged, as he turned around. "Let's go inside."

Striker and Rudy went ahead and climbed in through the hole in the

wall, gears in hand and Buddy following. Milo entered inside while still clinging to Natal, and Brick hesitated with another glance back in the jungle. At some point, Brick finally turned inside with everyone else.

Chapter 50

CHAPTER FIFTY

"...I think I'm lost." Tails Doll muttered, as he fluttered aimlessly through the jungle. *"Brick's not here... the kids aren't here... the clubhouse isn't here... so where am I?"*

The jungle was vast, so it usually would be full of life. But strangely enough, it had grown eerily silent ever since Tails Doll strayed away from the kids.

"...where is everyone?" Tails Doll mused, as he stopped, before folding his arms. *"Hrm... if only someone could point me in the right direction."*

"...Tails Doll?" The plushie could hear a voice nearby, but yet he couldn't see anything.

"Hm?" Blinking, Tails Doll looked around him. "Who's there?" he called.

From nowhere, a simian cyborg appeared into view, and removed his mask while placing on his glasses. Cal looked at Tails Doll curiously. "I didn't expect to be seeing you here," he said.

"...Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll cheered, as he flew right on top of Cal's head, perching himself on the monkey's head. *"I sure didn't expect to see you here, too!"*

"What are you doing here Tails Doll?" Cal asked, looking up at the doll.

"Big Bro has me out here for scouting." Tails Doll replied. *"What about you?"*

"He sent me scouting as well," Cal answered. For a minute, he was quiet while considering whether or not he should ask, so he went ahead. "Tails Doll, do you know what Metal's up to? I was never told

anything..."

"Is Big Bro *up to something?"* Tails Doll uttered in surprise, as he glanced down at Cal. *"That's news for me."*

"Well, I mean what's he doing right now?" Cal asked again in a more simple way.

"What's he's doing..." Tails Doll muttered, as he rubbed the side of his head. *"...he's training."*

Cal observed Tails Doll and glared at him. "There's something you're not telling Uncle Cal, Tails Doll," he said.

"No, I'm telling you, Uncle Cal! Big Bro's training!" Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"I can't exactly lie, can I?"*

"But you can't exactly be telling the *whole* truth either," Cal murmured, crossing his arms. "I don't think Metal would need to train; he would be too confident in his own abilities to admit he needs training...so if you're saying that, he must be training someone else." After reasoning, he looked up at Tails Doll again. "Who is it?"

"..." Tails Doll, however, was silent.

Cal shook his head. "You know, it kind of hurts my feelings that you guys don't trust me, and you keep me out of the loop. All I want to know is who it is." He also really wanted to know why it was kept such a big secret from him.

"...I can't tell you." Tails Doll finally uttered, though his tone had shifted into a darker one. *"Sorry, but you'll have to ask* Metal Sonic *directly for that. He told me not to tell anyone else..."*

"Really now?" Cal said, raising an eyebrow. "Fine. Do you know where I can find him then?"

"That's another thing he told me not to tell anyone." Tails Doll shrugged. *"Try contacting him via radio, or something."*

Cal grumbled, while he picked up Tails Doll from his head and set

him down. "Alright then. By the way, if you're looking for Jill's friends, they went that way," and he pointed the direction that would lead the doll to Tails' Shop.

"Oh, thanks for the info!" Tails Doll said in his normal tone again, before flying off in the direction Cal pointed him to. "Thanks, Uncle Cal!"

"Hm," Cal more or less grunted in response while Tails Doll flew away. Once he was gone, he contemplated whether or not to phone Metal Sonic and ask him.

But if he was SO BUSY "training," he might just get a scolding than an answer. It was also then that he remembered Metal Sonic instructed not to question anything about that.

But the monkey was suspicious.

"...maybe Jill's friends might know a thing or two," he said. After the cloaking device activated, he aimed for the direction of the shop, but through a different path that would not intertwine with Tails Doll's.

"Again, sorry about the damage, Professor," Brick apologized.

"Don't worry about it, Brick." Tails chuckled, as he was drinking a cup of tea. "I've had worse things happen to my house, believe me. I'm sure that you, Whisker and Proxy can get it back up within an hour."

"Still, I'm just glad that it didn't hurt you." Natal noted, as she scratched the back of her head.

"Yeah, that would've been really bad!" Jack chimed in.

"Yeah," Brick agreed with Jack. He was quiet for a minute before he looked at them. "Guys...is it alright if I talked to the Professor alone?" He figured it might be best if he was the one to break the news to the old fox.

"...sure." Natal nodded, before she motioned for the kids to follow

her. "C'mon, let's see if we can't get in touch with the Captain." she said, before she and the kids left the room, leaving Brick and Tails alone.

"...so..." Tails muttered, as he placed the cup on the table, glancing at Brick. "What is it?"

"There's some things I need to tell you Professor," Brick said, "and some of those things could be hard for you to hear...so I'm giving you that warning before I tell them to you."

Cal surprisingly made it to the shop before Tails Doll, or as far as he knew. Like the ninja he was, he hopped onto the roof and put his ear to it. A device installed in his ear allowed him to listen in closely, and while adjusting the device, he discovered the frequency that locked onto Brick and Tails.

"...is that so..." Tails nodded, as he closed his eyes. "...alright, what is it that you need to tell me?"

"To start off with," Brick said. "...Metal Sonic popped by the Clubhouse twice. The first time was yesterday in order to warn us about this Johnny character, who happened to be pretending to be Jack while Callous had taken Jack...but thankfully Metal had brought Jack back, and he kicked Johnny's butt out of the Clubhouse."

Ah, so that's why they were so pissed when I visited, Cal thought.

"...Metal Sonic did that?" Tails uttered, as he blinked. "That's... strange. I'd never guess that he'd do something along those lines..."

"It is strange," Brick agreed. "...I don't know why, but...do you remember when Brownie said she was going to go off and train?"

That juicy tid-bit made Cal listen attentively. *...no, can it just be a coincidence?* he thought.

"...yes?" Tails blinked, as he looked at Brick with interest. "What about it?"

"...Metal Sonic's training Brownie as her mentor," Brick continued.

Cal's eyes widened, backing away from the roof. "No..." he murmured to himself. "...that can't be true, can it?"

Tails' eyes widened in surprise, as he looked at Brick in disbelief. "...he's... training her?" he uttered, before placing a hand against his head. "Why... why would he do that?"

"He claims its for the purpose of ridding Callous, telling her that no one can take Metal Sonic's place," Brick said. "But me and Proxy have my doubts..."

Cal heard that too, and dismounted the roof; still cloaked in invisibility. "...and so do I, for that matter," he murmured to himself, disappearing into the jungle.

Tails simply couldn't believe what he was hearing. "...Metal Sonic... just what is going on with him?" he uttered, before looking down at the table. "Actively helping out Jill, even though he needs to kill her to rule the world..."

"I know," Brick said.

"...and we don't even know where either of them are hiding out..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed his temples in an attempt to calm down. "What is the world coming to...?"

"...the second time Metal appeared was this morning, in order to take us to a Gaia temple," Brick said. "There...we found out some more startling things."

"...what sort of things?" Tails inquired.

"Metal had some questions and went there to seek out...Light Gaia," Brick said. "He managed summon him...by copying Brownie's data and using some Purity. Light Gaia appeared; well actually, he wanted us to call him Chip."

"Chip..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed his head. *How on earth did Metal know how to...* he thought, before shaking his head. "And... what did you learn from Chip?"

"...we learned what Purity and Corruption were, and where it came

from," Brick answered. "Purity came from Chip's energy, and Corruption came from Dark Gaia's energy; but the two energies were an evolution of their powers."

"...really." Tails nodded, as he took the information in. "What else?"

"We found out the origins of Deity Novagod; that vampire that Brownie told us," Brick continued. "Apparently during the time Sonic and Chip were piecing together the world back then, one of Dark Gaia's minions tried to possess the guy, and instead merged with him and the evil in his heart, creating who he was. We were also told that Deity invented Corruption, which was a result of his transformation."

"So he..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed his chin. "...what else did you learn?"

"Brownie's mother was the one who created Purity," Brick said. "But for some reason, she gave it up to her daughter...Chip said it was too complicated to explain."

"I see..." Tails nodded, as he closed his eyes. "...did he tell you anything else?"

"He did...and this is the news that I was warning you about earlier, Professor..." Brick muttered; as he was actually worried about what Tails' reaction would be to what he would say. "...do you...remember when you told me...what happened to Sonic, Professor?"

Blinking, Tails looked at Brick. "...of course..." he nodded. "...why do you ask?"

Brick was so afraid, he didn't look Tails in the eye. He looked away. "...Deity Novagod...he..." he couldn't even say it.

"..." Tails looked at Brick in silence, before sighing. "...if it's too hard for you to say... maybe it can wait, until you feel that you're ready."

"No," Brick said quickly. "You need to know...you have the right to know...it's just..." Brick trailed off, before he tried again, swallowing. "Deity Novagod was the one who...killed Sonic." There, he said it.

It took Tails just a few seconds to realize just what Brick had said, and needless to say, he was shocked beyond belief. "...he... he did it?" he managed to say, as he placed his hands on the table. "The one who killed Sonic... was him, all along...?"

Brick couldn't bear to look at him. All he did was nod while he continued to look away.

"...I just..." Tails uttered, as he gulped, trying to hold back his tears. "...what about Jill? Does... does she know?"

"...according to Metal," Brick said. "He and Brownie found out recently, but they knew about it longer than we did. He didn't want to tell us why or how, though..."

"...I see..." Tails nodded, as he began taking deep breaths, trying to calm down, but one could tell that it wasn't working at all. "...did Chip say anything else?"

"He answered another one of Metal's questions in terms of markings that he somehow had on his hands..." Brick said. "but after that, we left and Metal went back to wherever Brownie was."

"...I see..." Tails nodded, before he closed his eyes. "...what is the world coming to...?" At that point, he covered his eyes with his right hand, before he broke down crying.

Brick finally looked back at Tails, getting up and setting a hand on his shoulder. He couldn't find anything encouraging to say, and he figured that he needed to allow Tails to let it out.

As the old fox cried, unbeknownst to them, someone else had been eavesdropping in on the conversation, hiding right by the hole in the wall. ...*poor* Tails . Tails Doll thought, as he closed his eyes, before fluttering away from Tails' house, back towards the jungle.

Once he had gotten far enough, Cal took a deep breath. "No.." he muttered. "...all this time, he lied to me."

How despicable...he went behind your back.

Cal didn't even realize it was that other voice again...because he

was growing angry and he was agreeing with the voice. *He went behind my back...*

That's right...

Cal clenched his fists, as the anger boiled up. *He kept me out of the loop...EVERYONE knew about it but me!*

Maybe Metal didn't trust you as much as you thought he did...

Maybe not... Cal thought.

At that point, he'd hear someone trying to attain contact with him. *"Calculate. Sorry that I haven't been in touch lately; I've been busy."* As it turned out, it was Metal Sonic. *"How are things on your end? No encounters with Callous, I hope."*

" None..." Cal growled.

"Splendid." Metal transmitted. *"Just looking out for you... so, how have things been? Find any* Chaos Emeralds *yet?"*

"No, I haven't found any Chaos Emeralds..." Cal replied. He was really starting to hate hearing Metal's voice right now. "...why, Metal?" he uttered.

"...beg your pardon?" Metal inquired.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were up to?" Cal clarified, as his voice started to darken.

"...so you've found out." Metal muttered, before sighing. *"Listen, the only ones who were supposed to know about it were me and* TailsDoll *. I didn't want everyone in the whole world to think that I was a good guy, for helping her out."*

"The issue wasn't whether or not I would've thought you to be a good guy," Cal snarled. "The issue was that you didn't trust me...so you went behind my back to train Jill while I went being your little lackey to look for the Chaos Emeralds!"

"I had reason not to fully trust you." Metal replied sharply, without losing the cool in his voice. " *After all, which of us was it that allowed Callous to use his body for whatever she wanted for an hour, nonstop? I couldn't risk Callous using you whilst I was training her."*

"I wouldn't dare let that bitch use me!" Cal snapped back. He could see in his hands they were collecting the dark energy. "...now that I can use the same power she can."

"...you can use Corruption *?"* Metal uttered in surprise. *"My, my, you certainly show progress. But let's be reasonable; how was I supposed to know that you could use Corruption back then, Calculate?"*

"I didn't find out until recently..." Cal said, as the dark energy grew from his hands to his arms. "...but now that I think about it, I probably wouldn't have wanted to tell you anyway."

"I would likely have found out sooner or later." Metal responded. *"Now, Calculate, listen..."* Then, he sighed. *"...there's actually a different reason I decided to call up. Remember those conflicting thoughts we shut down earlier? Those... haven't resurfaced, have they?"* If Cal paid attention, Metal actually sounded a bit worried when asking that question.

Cal watched as the darkness spread around his body, amassing in a dark aura around him. "Not anymore they won't."

" *...I see.* " Metal nodded, as he groaned. *"Because... this is going to sound utterly ridiculous, but I think I have that problem, now."*

"Is that so?" Cal answered. "How do you think that happened?"

"I honestly have no idea." Metal responded. *"Well, I'll figure out how it happened at a later date. For now, I'll prepare Jill, so she can ensure that Callous will never bother us again. I do hope that you're not too upset by my not telling you; I was acting with your safety in mind."*

"...Actually, I've calmed down now," Cal replied, looking at the dark

energy suspended in his palm. That was the honest truth too; Cal felt positively relaxed while he stared at the Corruption in his hands. "...I may have stumbled on something here."

"Is that so?" Metal hummed. *"And what would that be?"*

"...just now when I got angry, the Corruption reacted," Cal said. "And I didn't fight it. Now I have an unusually good control on it...and I still have my head; my free will."

"...strange." Metal mused. *"Well, as long as I know that you bear no grudge against me. And don't worry; Callous will prove to be no problem for any of us after three days have passed from now."*

"Let's hope so," Cal muttered, clenching the Corruption to fade away. "Is that all Metal?"

"That would be it." Metal responded. *"And if anything peculiar happens, make sure to contact me ASAP. Understood?"*

"Understood," Cal said. "...and the same goes for you, Metal."

"I know, I know. " Metal replied. " *Until next time.* " Then the line went dead.

Once the line went dead, Cal silently observed everything going on. The Corruption was acting weird, and when he heard the voices they stopped again, but had he done that on his own? He agreed with the voices...yet he didn't quite give in. *That could be a hint to solving Metal's problem,* he thought.

But right now, he had other things to worry about. With nothing but that, he cloaked himself and took off quietly.

Jill was simply sitting, watching the pond quietly. Every now and then she'd spot some ripples caused by a dragonfly or another bug, but the pond was surprisingly still other than that.

"Sorry for taking so long." she heard Metal Sonic say, as he approached her from behind. *"How are you feeling?"*

"I feel alright," she replied. "What about you? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm alright." Metal replied, as he sat down by Jill, looking at the water. *...you're still in there, aren't you?* he thought, trying to see if he could get in contact with that voice he was hearing.

No response in Metal's head.

"I wonder what everyone else is up to," Jill murmured thoughtfully.

"...I'm sure they're doing alright." Metal shrugged, both relieved and disappointed that the voice wasn't talking back to him.

Jill stretched her arms. "...Metal, what was Eggman like?" she asked out of the blue.

"...Eggman?" Metal blinked upon hearing that question, before glancing at Jill. *"...well, he was ambitious, to say the least."* he began, before looking back at the water. *"He was a genius, but a bit- no, scratch that... very hot-headed, which often got him into trouble."*

"So I've heard from the Professor..." Jill chuckled.

"Oh, he's told you about him, has he?" Metal chuckled as well. *"I suppose what Prower has told you is pretty much all there is to tell about Eggman."*

"I don't know," Jill said. "I figured you'd have a better idea of him than the Professor would. After all, you worked for him...well, and against him at one point." Jill then looked at Metal. "...how did he treat you?"

"...well, I was his greatest success, so whenever Sonic utterly trounced me, he'd get to repairing me almost immediately." Then, he chuckled. *"He was a bit bossy, though; he'd chastise me if I happened to fail him... but he was somewhat dependent on me, so I*

always took it in stride." Then, he glanced up at the sky. *"Well, except that one time."*

"...what one time?" Jill asked.

"Oh, come on. " Metal chuckled again, as he glanced at Jill. *"Prower surely must have told you about when I first got this form, right?"*

"Yeah, but..." Jill blinked. "...he wouldn't have been able to tell it from *your* point of view."

"Oh, right..." Metal chuckled, as he closed his eyes. *"...well, after the destruction of* Station Square *by Chaos,* Eggman *began experimenting with data fragments of the water creature; a project he had to put on hold when Shadow was released."* Then, he closed his eyes. *"After retrieving Shadow's body after the ARK incident, he tried fusing what he had gotten from Chaos' data with my body, to see if I could be upgraded from it."*

"Getting you this form, I'm assuming," Jill said. "What made you want to overthrow Eggman?"

"...the data was corrupt." Metal began, as he folded his arms. *"It was likely due to insufficient experimentation, and the chaotic nature of such data, but it made an absolute mess of my databanks... and in turn, I lost all sense of self-control. I never realized up until that point... but all of Eggman's lectures had made a certain part of my mind grow resentful of him... and when the data got to me, it emerged in full."*

"...so what did Eggman do to you after you were defeated by Sonic and his friends?" she asked.

"The defeat knocked me back into my usual form." Metal shrugged. *"After that,* Eggman *spent a lot of time experimenting with the data of Chaos, to ensure that I wouldn't rebel the next time he applied it to me. Until then, I was in my usual form... if I recall correctly, it took just about five years before he dared to try the same procedure again."*

"...that was around the end of Eggman's campaign..." Jill muttered.

"Yes." Metal nodded. *"But even with me in the Neo form, Eggman was struggling to keep his rule stable. He wanted me to take out Sonic once and for all, while he kept everyone else busy... but I'm sure you've seen my attempt at that."*

"Yeah..." Jill murmured, looking back at the water. "...how long were you shut down?"

"...years. Many years." Metal muttered. *"By the time I finally regained my functions... well, I learned that Eggman, Sonic and Knuckles were dead. It wasn't exactly the brightest day of my existence..."*

"I'm sorry you had to find things out that way..." Jill said.

"Don't apologize." Metal said, as he closed his eyes. *"You're not the one at fault, so there's no need for apologies."*

"...it's a habit," Jill said.

"Oh well... old habits die hard, they say..." Metal noted, as he looked back at the water.

Jill glanced at Metal thoughtfully.

"...why don't you do some practice on your own? I'll need a bit more time to think." Metal eventually said.

"...sure," Jill said, getting up. Shortly after an amount of concentration, she had transformed into her Holy Form again, and went off behind Metal to practice by herself.

Tell me Metal, could you really have the strength to kill the only person who understands you? the other voice decided to speak now. *After all...you restrained yourself from killing her in her sleep that one night.*

...it was only a thought. Metal thought in protest. *I had the*

opportunity, but I'd rather see the outcome of her fight with Callous. If she loses, I'll have to kill her then. Then, he closed his eyes. *Just what do you want with me, anyway?*

I'm simply looking out for your well-being, the voice stated. *Think if you will...say that she does defeat Callous, and eventually Deity. Then say you manage to kill her and take over the world after all.*

Tell me, what then?

...is that a trick question? Metal scoffed. *I'd rule the world, terrorizing hapless citizens and ensuring that no one could stand in the way of my rule. What else would there be to it?*

Even then, it would seem empty. Eggman was the scum of Mobius that everyone hated, and everyone will do that to you too. While you may think you won't be affected...well, Eggman certainly hasn't met a single person that for once treated him with decency, even kindness.

Not like you.

Metal was silent, as he glared back at the water. *...just what do you want me to do?* he thought.

Open up while you still can. This is the third day of her training, and time is running out.

...so, what, you want me to befriend her? Metal scoffed. *Don't be ridiculous. I'm only her coach until her fight against Callous, and nothing else.*

Sure, you tell yourself that, but is that how you really feel?

That's the thing; I can't feel. I'm a machine, remember?

Sure, if you say so...

"Metal?" Jill said suddenly.

Hearing Jill's voice made Metal glance back at her. *"...yeah?"* he uttered.

Jill was aflutter in the air. *"...I thought about your backup plan...you know, to kill me in case Callous wins."*

"...oh, yes... that." Metal nodded, as he stood up, before turning to face Jill. " *What about it?"*

"I thought about it for a long time..." Jill said. *"...and I decided that I'm going to let you do it."*

Somehow, hearing that stunned Metal, though he didn't show it. *"...you're absolutely sure?"* he uttered, as he folded his arms.

"...yes," Jill answered hesitantly. *"Thinking about it a lot, I realized that I would rather let you take my life, than Deity..."* Then she looked at him. *"...I guess that means I keep that promise, huh?"*

"...it does." Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. *"But remember; we play to win. I don't want to see you lose after I've spent all this time training you, you see."*

Jill nodded. *"I understand."*

"Good. Now, let's get back to training." Metal said, as he turned his right arm into a blade. *...strange,* he thought, as he watched Jill. *She said that she'd allow me to kill her if she lost... so why am I not pleased by hearing that?*

I already said my good-byes to my friends anyway, Jill thought, bringing out her sword. *…but I wish I could still convince him otherwise.*

Ah, now the sentence has been made, the voice in Metal's head spoke again.

You be quiet. Metal responded to the voice, before glancing at Jill. " *Alright, get ready.* "

Chapter 51

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

"So, making any progress?" In the dark, Johnny glanced at Callous from the corner of his eyes, wondering if she had gotten anywhere with manipulating the figurine.

Callous laughed as she played with it. "It's like voodoo!" she chuckled. "Sure, Metal hasn't quite given in yet, but I think its working."

Johnny chuckled at this, as he approached Callous. "What do you suppose will happen with him when he finally gives in?" he inquired.

"The Corruption will take over his system," Callous said. "The only way Jill will be able to rid the Corruption is if she gets her hands on this figurine; and seeing as this thing is in the dark where she can't reach it, that's not likely."

"Heh... can't wait to see how he'll act once Corruption's gotten control of him." Johnny chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "How do you think he'll act?"

"He'll be in a lot of pain," Callous grinned mischievously. "Considering he's a machine and claims he doesn't feel, knowing what pain feels like for the first time will be horrible for him. He'll also feel all the other negative emotions like wrath, jealousy, and so on."

"Somehow, I get the feeling that we ought to tape it." Johnny chuckled. "But what if Jill finds out that something's up?"

"Even if she did, she wouldn't be able to stop it really," Callous said. "Besides, I can always preoccupy her with something else to keep her from sensing anything."

"Nice..." Johnny mused, as he tapped his chin. "...but still, Metal could end up coming out of it safe and sound. I'm still thinking of what happened to Slashers; the same thing could happen to Metal."

"…we could always hunt down Cal and use him to buy some more time," Callous said. "Cal still carries a little crush on Jill, and it seems like he can use Corruption, since he somehow got into the dark."

"Oh, yeah, that monkey." Johnny nodded, as he glanced at Callous. "By the way... what's your strategy when it comes to trying to bend Metal Sonic to your will? Are you torturing him via the figurine?"

"For now, I'm planting thoughts into his head to open up his mind to things; maybe manipulate what he thinks," Callous said. "I do have the capability of administering physical pain, but I think that would make him fight it all the more rather than give into it. Seeing as Jill cares about him, it could work against her though. Heck, we could use this to force Jill to forfeit the match if we wanted to."

"That's pretty clever." Johnny chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "And when she and Metal are dealt with, her friends and the renegades are going to be easy pickings."

"That's right," Callous chuckled with him, looking at Johnny with interest.

"Now, the question remains, though..." Johnny mused, as he glanced at Callous, smirking. "...in what ways could we kill them? The possibilities would be endless."

"I'm sure we can let our imagination run wild later," Callous said, walking closer to Johnny. "After all, we can't plan TOO far ahead…"

"Yeah... we should stick with plotting how to bring down Jill and Metal, for now." Johnny nodded, as he began approaching Callous as well.

Callous put her arms around Johnny's neck, chuckling playfully. "There's nothing quite like tormenting innocent minds," she whispered.

"I couldn't agree more." Johnny chuckled, as he wrapped his own arms around Callous' body, pulling her in for a kiss.

*****WARNING: From here, things get somewhat intense. For those who aren't interested, skip ahead to the next scene. This**

content raises the rating a tad, but at least you guys get a fair warning before stumbling onto it.

Those willing to read it...fine.***

Callous kissed Johnny lustfully while touching his chest. Johnny, much like their last time, was quick to burrow his hands underneath Callous' clothing, stroking her back without breaking away from the kiss. This time around, however, he was a lot more forceful. This aggressiveness turned Callous on immediately, and she stripped her clothes again. After she finished removing her clothes, Johnny almost without delay pinned her down on the ground, briefly breaking away.

"So, how does it feel to be the dominated?" he asked, before immediately kissing her again.

After kissing, Callous broke to answer. "It feels intense…even kinda hot." Then she returned for more kissing.

"Oh, it's going to get better." Johnny chuckled after breaking away, as he began kissing Callous' neck, slowly moving downwards as he massaged her breasts.

Callous breathed a gasp of pleasure.

After a short while, Johnny moved his hand downwards, circling his finger around Callous' stomach, slowly spiraling down towards her pelvic area. "Go on; tell me how much you want me," he said with a smirk.

Callous was somehow lost; hypnotized even. Instead of wanting to know how that happened, she really only wanted one thing right now. So when she felt that finger going down, she got more excited. "…I want you," she urged in a desperate whisper.

Alrighty, back to other things...**

Boomer and Newt were walking down the hall, and she happened to glance at his tattoo. "Hey Newt," she said. "How long have you had that dragon tattoo?"

Newt blinked, as he glanced at the tattoo. "Oh, this?" he said with a chuckle. "I got it about... what was it, eight years ago? Three years before I joined GUN."

"Why'd you get it?" she asked again curiously.

Newt hummed, as he tapped his chin in thought. "I think it was partly because I was kind of a rebel back in those days, y'know... and partly because I thought it looked cool." he said, the last part with a minor chuckle.

"As well as the tattoo of the flames on your head I'm guessing," Boomer added, chuckling with him.

"Yeah, that one was solely because I thought it'd look cool, y'know." Newt chuckled, as he scratched the back of his neck.

"So you got tattoos," Boomer said. "…got any piercings too?"

"Actually, no." Newt said, as he scratched his cheek in embarrassment. "Truth be told, I considered it... but I was actually hurting pretty bad after the tattoos were drawn on me, y'know, so I passed on piercings."

Boomer laughed, elbowing him jokingly. "What, you wouldn't want a nose ring like Brick?"

"Nah, I don't think it'd fit me, y'know." Newt replied, as he laughed as well.

"Well, you two are awfully cheerful," remarked Hunter as he approached the two in the hallway.

Boomer observed Hunter and could tell that he was somewhat shaky. "…something wrong, Hunter?" she asked.

"…oh, nothing," he murmured, walked past them. "…just a full moon tonight is all…"

"...huh." Newt uttered, watching Hunter leave. "Wonder why he'd be concerned 'bout the full moon..."

"Well haven't you heard?" Charmy was the next one to encounter the two of them in the hallway. "Under the full moon, Hunter transforms into a Werewolf; and there's talk that the same could happen to Ani."

"Really?" Boomer asked, looking at Charmy in disbelief.

"Yep," Charmy said. "That's why we're moving her into the basement tonight."

"She's bein' moved to the basement?" Newt said, as he looked at Charmy with a surprised expression. "Did Sage give the okay on that?"

"On the condition that she could be with Ani, yes," Charmy said. "Other then that, nothing big going on today so far, SO…" he gave Boomer and Newt a wide, teasing grin, "…how are the two of you this morning?"

"Fine…" Boomer muttered, looking at Charmy's grin. "…what the heck is that look for, Captain?"

"Oh, it's nothing really," Charmy said. "I just remembered a funny joke is all…"

"Really?" Newt noted, as he raised an eyebrow. "Must've been a really funny joke, then."

"Oh yes, it was a very funny joke," Charmy chuckled, just in time to be interrupted by a shrill ringing in one of the offices nearby. His smile fell as he looked to where the sound came from. "…is someone calling us?" he wondered, heading to the office.

Curious, Boomer followed.

Now who could that be? Newt thought, as he followed the two into the office.

Newt and Boomer made it to the office just in time to see Charmy pick up the phone. "Hello?" he said.

" *HI CAPTAIN!"* That caused Charmy pain in his ears, holding the

phone away.

"…hi Rudy," he muttered, once his ears stopped hurting.

"Rudy?" Newt uttered, as he tilted his head. "So the others are calling from the ruins..."

Unfortunately, Rudy's mouth took off.

" *It'ssocool! '—"*

"Whoa, hold on there Rudy, breathe," Charmy chuckled. "Perhaps you should let me talk to the others. Is Tails there?"

"… *uh, the Professor doesn't feel well right now,"* Rudy remarked.

"…really?" Charmy said curiously. "Well, is there anyone else I could talk to?"

"You can talk to me ." they'd hear Natal say, as she presumably yanked the phone away from Rudy. *"How's it going?"*

"Ah, Natal," Charmy said. "Things are going good here, but I'm told that Tails doesn't feel well. What seems to be the matter?"

"Well..." Natal began, as she hummed. *"I'm not too clear on it, but Brick supposedly told him something that hit him really hard. I can get Brick to tell you it, but... it's pretty shocking, from what I've gathered."*

"…is that so?" Charmy asked. "Well…go ahead and put him on…"

" *Alright. Just give me a sec* ..." Natal said, as the line went silent for a moment.

"...wonder what's so shocking that it got to the Professor...?" Newt mused.

"… *Captain?"* Brick's voice came on the phone.

"Ah, Brick," Charmy said. "It sounds like you had news for Tails and I've also heard that it really shocked him."

" *Oi…"* groaned Brick. *"…listen Captain, I'll explain over the phone, but this news is really going to affect you too. That's your fair warning."*

Charmy looked strange at Boomer, while she shrugged. Then the old bee gave the bull permission, "Alright, shoot."

So Brick began his explanation. He began telling Charmy the first of the startling news of all; that Metal Sonic was training Jill.

"You've got to be kidding me boy!" Charmy shouted over the phone.

" *No joke Captain,"* Brick said.

"…Jill can't seriously…" Boomer was just as shocked as Charmy.

"...why would she do that?" Newt uttered in an equally shocked tone.

" *It gets more interesting…"* Brick muttered, going onto another explanation about the events that happened yesterday; Jack being momentarily kidnapped by Callous, Johnny posing as him, and Metal's rescue on kicking him out of the Clubhouse.

Boomer, overhearing about Callous, clenched fists. "That bitch was there too?"

"I'm more surprised that Metal had come to kick Johnny out," Charmy said. "…it makes one wonder what he's doing."

"Yeah, why is he helping us out, anyway?" Newt muttered, as he scratched his head in thought.

" *I'm told it's to assert himself and that Callous can't take his place* ," Brick said, *"but a good deal of us doubts it."*

"I see," Charmy said. "Go ahead and continue, if you will Brick."

Finally, Brick recapped all that happened this morning when Metal took them to the Gaia temple. He told them about Purity and Corruption, and Deity's origins, all to the point where he finished by saying, *"—Brownie's mom gave up Purity to her for some reason, but Chip said it was too complicated to explain."*

"Interesting…" Charmy muttered, rubbing his chin. "Who knew that Purity and Corruption came from the Gaias?"

"Yeah... when you sit down and think about it, it kinda makes sense, y'know..." Newt nodded.

"So Brick, is that all the news you have to tell me?" Charmy asked.

"… *there's one more thing I need to tell you Captain* ," Brick uttered. *"Brace yourself, okay?"*

"…brace myself?" This certainly was very weird, but Charmy decided to play along. "Alright then, Brick, go ahead and tell me."

This time, it was surprisingly silent actually. Boomer waited to see what Charmy's reaction would be to this mysterious news that Brick had to say and so did Newt, as he looked curiously at Charmy.

The first amount of silence Charmy remained unchanged. Then he gradually grew a horrified look of petrified shock; a bad enough reaction that it changed Boomer's curiosity to concern. It was when Charmy dropped the phone and fell against the wall holding his head that made Boomer act.

"Captain?" she uttered, rushing to him.

"…no…" he uttered, with tears building up in his eyes. "…is he serious…?"

" *Captain?"* even Brick called from the phone on the ground.

Blinking, Newt looked from Charmy to the phone, as he quickly picked it up. "Yo, the captain's looking absolutely horrified, y'know! What did ya tell him?" he asked, as he glanced back at Charmy.

" *Newt, is that you?"* Brick said. *"I'm not sure if you'll understand, but did you know that Sonic the Hedgehog was murdered?"*

"...yeah?" Newt nodded, recalling the file pictures he and Boomer had found. "What about it?"

" *The Professor and the Captain never found out who the killer was,"*

Brick briefly explained. *"But we recently found out that it was the same guy who hunted down Brownie awhile back. It was that vampire guy; Deity Novagod."*

Hearing that, Charmy finally broke down into crying as he sat on the floor, with Boomer beside him. Even if her suspicion had been right about it being someone who could use Corruption, she was shocked to hear it was the vamp from Jill's past.

"...no way..." Newt uttered, as his eyes widened. "How... why..." So many questions raced through the salamander's head, that he couldn't even utter them.

"… *I don't know,"* Brick muttered after a good deal of silence.

"...r-right..." Newt uttered, as he held his head, looking down at Charmy. "...I guess the Professor's not the only one who's not feelin' too well, now..."

"… *I should probably go,"* Brick murmured.

"...yeah, maybe so..." Newt nodded, as he closed his eyes.

" *I'll talk to you guys later,"* Brick said, followed by a click that ended the line.

Boomer tried to comfort Charmy as he sat there and cried.

" *Uhggh….I feel that nausea again…"* Jill moaned, doubled over on the ground with her face planted in the grass.

"Again?" Metal uttered, as he approached Jill. *"Callous is doing something you find repulsive again, huh?"*

" *Yes,"* Jill groaned . *"But it was even worse than the last time…"*

"Hm." Metal nodded, as he sighed. *"Maybe we should take a break, until you feel better."*

"… *much appreciated,"* Jill muttered. Then she cringed as her stomach tossed and turned drastically. *"…eugh…"*

"...hmph, it doesn't look too good." Metal hummed, as he formed a bucket out of his body, before placing it next to Jill. *"Use this if you need it."*

"… *I don't barf,"* Jill muttered. *"…no matter how sickening it is…I've always had a strong stomach. Thanks for the offer though…"*

"Don't mention it." Metal shrugged. *"Still, wouldn't hurt to have it around."*

For awhile, Jill sat there being sick. It wasn't over yet, but Jill was easing up when she said this, *"I really wish we didn't share a soul...there are just some things I'd rather be kept in the dark about; no pun intended,"* she grumbled.

"We all have skeletons in the closet." Metal noted, as he sat down, looking at Jill. *"Don't worry too much about it; when you defeat Callous, you'll take back what's rightfully yours."*

"...I certainly hope so," Jill murmured.

"..." Metal folded his arms as he observed Jill. *"...are you absolutely sure that you want me to end your life, if you lose?"*

Jill glanced back at Metal from where she was lying on the ground. *"...yes,"* she said. *"I'm sure."*

"...and how should I relay the news of your passing to your friends?" Metal inquired.

"...a good deal of them might just assume that you killed me and Callous," Jill said, turning away. *"...maybe for the sake of your reputation...you can say that. After all, it isn't very far from the truth."* Jill felt so disappointed at what she said. In fact, hearing it spoken out loud was upsetting, and she managed to forget her nausea while she tried not to think about crying.

She had already been emotional enough yesterday.

"...if you say so." Metal said, as he sighed. Somehow, he had a nagging feeling that he didn't want for that to happen, and that he didn't want to say that. *...what's wrong with me* ? he thought.

Jill thought about her friends then. The kids, Team Alpha and the GUN agents, the Chaotix, Tails...

...Brick.

...I can't believe I'm risking all that , she thought.

What's more is that she wouldn't be able to help Metal.

That thought was devastating enough to knock her out of her Holy Form and back to normal all of a sudden.

Seeing that startled the Metallix. *"Jill?"* he uttered, as he approached her. *"What's wrong?"*

"...n-nothing," she said with a shaky, hurt voice.

"...too bad that I can't help you practice the art of lying ." Metal sighed, as he sat down right in front of her. *"Tell me. What's wrong?"*

"I just...wish I could be able to help you somehow," Jill muttered. "...no, it's silly..."

"...still thinking about that, hm?" Metal noted. *"Look... I appreciate the concern, at least."*

"I know..." Jill said. "...and it's not like you killing me is set in stone, but if it does happen..." Jill turned away from Metal again. She didn't want to get into it.

She had gotten close to Metal when she shouldn't have.

"...if it does happen... then what?" Metal inquired, pressing the issue.

"...then what I've felt was for nothing." Jill wasn't quite sure, but those words sounded right.

Hearing that, Metal blinked, before he nodded. *"...I see."* he

muttered, as he turned away from Jill as well.

Jill buried her face in the grass, taking a deep, depressed sigh. She couldn't believe that she had said that.

...so if I kill her... Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. *...then she'll have been wrong... god, why am I even thinking about this?*

"...I don't feel sick anymore," Jill said, hoping to break the tension.

"...good." Metal nodded, as he glanced back at Jill. *"...do you feel like resuming training, or... do you want to continue the break?"*

Jill clutched the grass. "...I want to continue the break...I know I need training but...I just..." she sighed again, closing her eyes.

"...I understand." Metal nodded, as he looked away from Jill. *"...just tell me when you feel like resuming training."*

Hm...looks like you hurt her feelings. The voice in Metal's head popped up again.

...and just how am I responsible for that? Metal reiterated. *She uttered those words, not me.*

But what is your reaction to all this? She just confessed something… the voice said.

...frankly, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to think of it . Metal responded. *Should I take it in stride? Should I take offense to it? I honestly don't know.*

In all honesty, it looked like she wanted to be your friend after all, but now that you'll have to kill her…well, most people could find that rather depressing.

I only have to kill her if she loses. And that's exactly what I'm training her not to do. She can't lose. She won't *lose.*

You sound quite determined to do that…

I don't want to see any force under Novagod triumph again, that's all.

Did I say anything? No…you're just too defensive, which is why I have a hard time believing what you say.

Well, sorry for not sounding trustworthy to you. I'm training Jill so she can defeat Callous, alright? If you have a problem about that, tell it to me straight.

I'm not the one with the problem here…

And just what is that supposed to mean?

The voice tsked him. *Poor little oblivious robot…*

...would you stop being so damn cryptic, and tell me what the hell you're talking about, already? Metal thought angrily.

Well, from what I observed, she wanted to be friends with you, the voice said. *But the problem seems to be that you can't decide if* you *want to be* her *friend.*

So…Metal, do you want to be her friend?

...are you kidding me? Metal thought. *The whole reason you're bugging me is because you want me to befriend her? I can't do that; how am I supposed to take over the world if I have to worry about 'harming a friend', or something along those lines?*

Well, that's up to you to decide.

...you listen up. Metal thought, as he glanced at Jill. *I may not admit it to anyone but you, but I've gained a lot of respect for that girl. She wants only the best for those around her, even if they have plans to kill her... but I do not make friends. Got it?*

The voice didn't answer this time.

...huh. That's odd. Metal thought, before turning around, still looking at Jill. *...I still don't get it. What good could she possibly see in me? I'm surprised that she cares so much about me, especially after I*

killed Shadow...

By this time, Hunter and Sage were on their way to Ani's room so that they could move her downstairs into the basement.

With all the commotion going on with Charmy, things had fallen silent due to the tension.

They figured they'd get it out of the way now.

However, the moment Hunter opened the door; the two could only gawk at the horror.

There was another hole in the wall, with the wind flowing into the room. Ani was gone, and Cocoa had been left behind on a mattress that had been scarred by claw-marks.

"…no!" Hunter uttered, seeing this.

"She... woke up?" Sage uttered in shock, as she ran to the bed, before glancing out the hole in the wall. "And it's not even a full moon!" Gritting her teeth, Sage ran out the hole, before taking flight. "Hunter, hop aboard! We have to find her before she gets herself hurt!"

"I don't get it!" Hunter said. "How could she wake up?"

"I don't know! Now hurry up, Hunter, or I'm leaving you here!" Sage called, as she closed her eyes, trying to pick up some brainwaves that could match Ani's.

Hunter quickly hopped on, looking around to see if he could pick up his daughter's scent or presence with his own telekinesis.

"...tsch. I'm not getting anything." Sage muttered, as she began flying a bit away from the HQ. "What about you, Hunter?"

"…something…" Hunter replied in a daze. "…it's…uncontrollable… her sense is raging. I think she's angry about something…and she went to hunt down what made her angry…"

"...you don't suppose that it could be Callous?" Sage uttered, as she

glanced at Hunter.

"…I don't know…" Hunter said. "…but I'm more worried what Ani will do rather than if she'd going to be okay…if she's out long enough for the full moon to hit her—" he shuddered to think it. "—we just have to find her, Sage!"

"We'll find her; don't worry!" Sage said, as she began picking up speed, scanning the area below her with her eyes. "Tell me if you pick up anything we can follow!"

While Hunter and Sage were flying the skies above, a large, bulky, dark figure was speeding through the woods on fours, blindly following nothing but a sixth sense that told her to go this way.

They didn't know anything about her…even while she was asleep; her hearing was so acute that she heard the telephone call Charmy received.

Jill training with Metal.

According to Ani, that was purely bullshit.

An enemy was an enemy. She had trusted an enemy once before, and she was betrayed. She wasn't going to let the same thing happen again; to someone else no less.

She was hunting down Metal for the slaughter of Shadow and for using Jill….

So in the distance, Jill was still lying on the grass when she shot up out of her depressed coma. "Something's coming!" she uttered.

" *...hm?* " Blinking, Metal looked around. " *Who could it be...?* "

Metal couldn't even hope to see what was coming, and shortly, something large rushed out and pinned down the Metallix, snarling at him with large jagged teeth and holding him down with big, burly arms.

" ***You bastard!"*** Were-Ani screamed in Metal's face.

"A-Ani?" Jill stuttered, when she realized that this large monster was her friend.

" *...Ani?* " Metal replied with a neutral tone, as his eyes flashed blue. " *So this is what Cal was talking about...* " At that point, a blue glow surrounded Were-Ani, as Metal used her own data against her, lifting her up with telekinesis.

Ani struggled angrily, still glaring deathly at Metal. Then she extended her arms like rubber, punching Metal in the face.

Or at least, she would have, if a black barrier suddenly didn't appear around Metal, protecting him from the punch. " *...impressive.* " he noted, as he got on his feet, still looking at Were-Ani. " *Jill, do you think you could try and reason with her? It seemed to work wonders when you did it with Omega.* "

" ***I'm not listening to whatever crap you filled her head with Metal!"*** Ani screamed. ***"You're using her!"***

"Ani…that's not true…" Jill muttered.

" ***Is it?"*** Ani screamed again.

Jill flinched, and even wondered if that was true. After all, she had her doubts before about trusting Metal…so she turned questionably to Metal.

" *...Jill, we've been through this before.* " Metal said calmly, without taking his eyes off Ani. " *I'm not here as your enemy, and I do not plan on killing you... I'm here as your coach.* "

" ***LIAR!"*** Ani screamed. ***"Jill, you can't seriously trust him, can you? DID YOU FORGET HE KILLED SHADOW?"***

Jill's strength was crumbling. She didn't know what to say or think.

" ***Jill, you CAN'T trust him!"*** Ani continued. ***"I trusted a bad guy once, and he used me to do HORRIBLE things! You don't think Metal might do the same thing to you, if your stupid battle with Callous is won?"***

" *...fine.* " Metal scoffed, as he closed his eyes, before walking a bit backwards. " *If you don't believe what I say, then maybe this will convince you.* " Then, the aura around Ani vanished, just as Metal took the Chaos Emerald in his chassis out of his body. " *I won't attack, run away, or defend myself... so do your worst, Anistasia.* " he said, as he threw the emerald to Jill.

Jill was horrified while catching the emerald, and watched as Ani didn't hesitate to sock Metal in the face twice, and effortlessly tear off his arm.

True to his word, however, Metal didn't budge from where he stood, allowing Ani to wail on him.

Jill trembled in fear, watching Ani practically tear Metal to pieces. She pulled off his other arm, and then whacked him over the face with it, along with grabbing him by the legs and hitting him against the ground.

Her attacks were quite devastating to say the least. Bits of metal scrap were flying everywhere while Ani did the damage. It even got to a point where Ani pretty much ripped him in half with her teeth.

Jill broke down. "ANI, STOP IT! PLEASE!"

That voice reached Ani, and she spat out Metal's upper half while looking at Jill, who had broken down crying on her knees.

However, even ripped in half, Metal still seemed to function, as he glanced at Jill from where he was lying.

Ani watched Jill momentarily, before she approached her.

Jill continued to weep. "…believe me…I trusted a bad guy too, and that got my village burned down, and everyone I used to know and love turned their back on me…"

"…but Metal's different…" she could hardly get the words out as she cried, while Ani's rage had finally simmered down. The husky wolf glanced at the torn apart Metal on the ground, and then back at Jill, where she rubbed Jill's back in comfort.

...going to such lengths, just to help me out... Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. *...she's certainly earned my respect...*

Jill tried to wipe away her tears. "…if you don't want to forgive Metal, then you don't have to Ani," she sniffled. "But I need his help…and he was willing enough to lend it…so please…don't hurt him anymore."

Ani didn't say anything, but she looked at Jill while thinking about it.

Chapter 52

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

"Hey!" At that point, they'd see Sage and Hunter come flying down towards them, with the raven landing in front of Jill and Ani. "...well, what do you know..." she uttered after a short while.

"…what happened here?" Hunter murmured in surprise, seeing Metal in pieces. Then he looked at Ani. "Did you do that?" he asked, pointing to Metal.

Ani nodded.

"...hm, is that so..." Sage hummed, as she was looking at Ani and Jill.

" *Don't worry about me; I'm fine.* " At that point, tendrils emerged from the upper half of Metal's body, picking up all the scraps of metal scattered about, including his arms and lower half, before reattaching them to his body. Soon enough, he was reassembled, as he stood up, before brushing dust off his arms.

Ani growled. Her efforts to rip Metal to shreds was useless after all, but even then she was relieved and surprised that Metal let her blow off her steam like that. ***"I'll never forgive you for killing Shadow,"*** Ani said. ***"But if Jill knows what she's doing, then at least I trust her…not you."***

" *...as long as it means that you won't come crashing in uninvited, then I don't exactly mind you not trusting me.* " Metal replied, as he simply glanced at Ani.

"In any case..." Sage began, as she glanced at Ani. "...you shouldn't be running about outside today; there's going to be a full moon tonight."

"… ***oh…"*** Ani knew what the full moons did.

She never told any of her friends about it…but on the nights of the full moon she crawled underneath the covers and went to bed as early as possible. She just made up excuses that she was tired, and her friends didn't question it at all.

So her friends never saw her transformation, and for a long time, Ani almost forgot what it was like. By habit she had gone to bed every certain number of days the full moon came on without even thinking about it.

"… ***but I don't want to go back to sleep,"*** Ani said.

"...if you don't want to, that's fine." Sage said with a shrug. "But we can't risk you being hit by the moon's light, so you'll at least have to stay inside."

" ***And I really want to see my friends again…"*** Ani added.

"…you'll be scaring the little daylights out of Milo," Hunter said. "Are you sure you want to see them looking like that?"

" ***What's that supposed to mean?"*** Ani grumbled with her hands on her hips.

" *Well, in that form, you don't exactly come off as non-threatening.* " Metal chimed in, as he folded his arms.

"I'm still working on finding out how to revert you back into your normal form without having to put your subconscious asleep..." Sage said. "...maybe..." Then, she glanced at Jill. "Now that we're all here, we could try it together."

"What do you mean?" Hunter asked Sage.

"Well, I was thinking that me and Jill could try and find a way to get Ani back to normal, since we're both here, and all." Sage replied. "Who knows; maybe we can do it before the full moon comes down on us?"

Jill clutched the emerald that Metal had earlier given her, unsure.

"...what's the matter, Jill? Shouldn't we try and help Ani out?" Sage

inquired.

" *You can at least try, Jill.* " Metal suddenly said, as he looked at Jill as well.

"…I don't know how to start," Jill said. "I've never met anyone else who's been in Ani's situation, so I don't know what to do." The emerald began to glow suddenly, and in wonder, Jill looked down at it.

The minute she looked at it, she saw images flashing in her mind.

She saw Sonic transforming into a Were-hog for the first time by Eggman's machine, Sonic and Light Gaia, or Chip, taking the very emerald to the temple to be restored, and the final battle where Super Sonic took on Dark Gaia in his final form. Finally, she saw Sonic waking up in the field, and finding Chip's necklace as a goodbye gift.

She blinked, not quite sure what happened right there.

" *...Jill? You kind of spaced out there for a moment...* " Metal noted.

The Chaos Emerald faded, while Jill looked up. "…Sonic's condition was fixed when Dark Gaia took back the essence that transformed him in the first place," she said, remembering those images. "…If Corruption is what's keeping Ani in this form, then dispelling it might revert her back." Then she looked at Ani. "The problem is that I already tried that…but because Corruption was affecting her when she was still a developing fetus…I don't know; somehow it's a lot harder than just getting rid of with Purity."

"...so you're saying that..." Sage muttered, as she glanced at Ani.

" *...wait.* " At that point, Metal snapped his fingers. " *I think I have a solution.* "

"Okay, so tell us," Hunter told Metal. "What's your idea?"

" *I don't know about you two,* " Metal began, as he glanced at Hunter and Sage, " *but I'm certain that Jill and Ani are aware of the fact that I possessed the gem keeping Deity Novagod sealed.* "

"And what does that have to do with the situation at hand?" Sage inquired.

" *Simple; I used a machine in Westopolis to extract Corruption from the gem, to power up some of the Shadow Androids. It could probably be used to extract the Corruption lingering in little Ani.* " Then, Metal looked at Ani.

Ani glared at Metal. ***"I don't know…"***

"I know you don't trust him Ani," Jill said, "but please give it a try…"

" *And really, unless someone who has the ability to pull Corruption out of your body conveniently shows up, there really isn't much choice.* " Metal said, as he walked towards Jill, taking the green emerald back. " *You don't even have to come to Westopolis; I can bring the machine here, and act as its power source.* "

"…it's really that easy?" Hunter wondered curiously.

" ***Fine, I'll do it,"*** Ani said, crossing her arms. ***"We'll wait right here and you can go get it and bring it here."***

" *Alright. I'll be right back.* " Metal said with a nod, before he warped away. It took a short while before Metal suddenly returned, though he didn't come alone; right next to him, a large machine stood, with what appeared to be a door with a small window at the front, which allowed anyone to look into what appeared to be a lone room.

Ani cocked her head side to side while looking at it. ***"…interesting,"*** she murmured.

" *Just a word of warning, Ani.* " Metal said, as he approached the backside of the machine, where a couple of sockets intended for cables were located. " *This machine has only been used on inanimate objects, so the procedure might be slightly painful.* " Then, enough tendrils emerged from his body to jack into the sockets, as the machine hummed, indicating that it had been activated.

This was further reinforced when the door slid open, and the room within it was lit up.

" ***I can take a little pain,"*** Ani said, cracking her large knuckles as she entered into the room.

Jill worried for both Ani and Metal, watching quietly.

As she entered the room, the door closed behind her. " *Jill, I'll need you to look into the window, and see if any progress is made during this.* " Metal said, as he closed his eyes.

Inside the room, several small cables with suction cups emerged from holes in the walls, as they attached themselves to Ani.

"… ***that's kinda creepy,"*** Ani murmured to herself, while Jill placed herself by the window to watch her.

" *...commencing extraction procedure... now!* " At that point, the machine began making a loud buzzing sound, as one could see some form of electric current being pulled from Metal into the machine.

Conversely, the cables attached to Ani began expanding, as she'd feel something being pulled out of her.

That felt even creepier to Ani, but it also provided some pain like Metal warned. The Werewolf-husky grit her teeth while this went on.

Jill watched Ani closely to look for any signs that she was reverting back.

Ungh... I sure hope this works... Metal thought, as the current of electricity from his body kept feeding the machine while the extraction continued. *At least before my body just shuts down due to power shortage...*

"There! Look!" Jill said, pointing.

Sure enough, Ani was decreasing in size, and while surrounded in a dark glow, her arms shortened and adjusted to a smaller, more innocent looking Ani. This process was a lot for her, so once she finished changing, she fell.

Thankfully, the cables attached to her body kept her from just

slamming down on the floor, as she was lowered to the ground, before the cables retreated into the walls. At that point, just as the door opened, a hatch on the side opened as well, pushing out a metallic cube.

"...that should do it." Metal uttered, as the tendrils disconnected themselves from the sockets, as the machine was turned off. *"Go and pick her up, now* ." he said, as he stumbled towards the cube.

As Hunter went to pick her up, Jill came to Metal. "What is that thing?" she asked, referring to the metallic cube.

"This..." Metal began, as he picked up the cube. *"...is where the Corruption is stored. To think, that inside this cube is what turned Ani into that form..."* Then, as he closed his eyes, the cube vanished. *"There; I transported it to Westopolis. It shouldn't cause any harm over there."*

Ani looked at herself. "I have to admit, being a werewolf is cool, but I'm glad to be back to normal!" she said. But while looking at Metal, she glanced away grudgingly.

"...Ani, what do you say?" urged Hunter.

"...thanks Metal," Ani mumbled, still not looking at the metallix.

"Are you going to be alright after powering that machine?" Jill asked Metal.

"Yes, I'll..." Metal uttered, as he suddenly stumbled, pushing his arm against the machine for support. *"Ugh... suddenly, I'm reminded of why I used the city's power grid to power this thing..."* Glancing at the machine, just as Ani and Hunter were out of it, it vanished as well. *"I'll just need some rest. An hour, at the most."*

Jill nodded. "You still have a Chaos Emerald right? That ought to help you restore your energy...but I'm sure you already knew that."

"Of course..." Metal nodded, as he stood up straight, though one could tell that he had some difficulty with it . *"In the meantime, I'll trust that you can train on your own..."* Then, he gave Sage and Hunter a glance. *"...and that none of you tell anyone what you've*

seen here."

"Actually..." Sage muttered. "...if I'm not mistaken, I'd say that everyone already knows."

That made Metal stop in his tracks, as he looked at Sage with wide eyes. *"...what?"*

Jill looked uneasily at them, until she turned to Metal. "...it must have been Jack," she said, sighing.

"And, given that Brick called Charmy earlier about the same issue, it shouldn't take long before the others at the HQ know about it." Sage chimed in.

At first, the Metallix was silent, as he could only blink. Then, his entire body began shaking, as he slowly clenched his hands into fists, looking down at the ground.

"...guys, you might want to cover your ears." Sage noted, as she did just that.

While Jill and Hunter did so as well, Ani only questioned it. "Why should we—!"

" *!* " Needless to say, the roar from the Metallix could be heard several miles away from where they were located right now.

Ani keeled over at the pain of her now bleeding ears, while Jill and Hunter cringed at his yell. Jill grew even more nervous while looking at Metal, wondering if he was going to do anything rash or unexpected. After all, Metal had gotten angry enough before that he hit Jill.

Thankfully, it seemed that Metal wasn't going to grow violent, as he merely stood in place, breathing heavily.

"...you alright, there?" Sage uttered, as she removed her hands from her ears.

" *...I had* hoped *to get through this with my reputation intact...* " Metal muttered, as he turned around. " *...but NOOOOO! All of a sudden,*

all my enemies find out that I'm training her! " As he marched towards a tree, he kept on ranting. " *Well, why stop there? Call the army, call the President, tell them all to get over here, and we'll throw a party because Metal Sonic is training Jill!* "

The group could still hear Metal rant and rave, as he sat down next to a tree in a huff, muttering obscenities to himself. "...he'll be fine. I think his ego just took a critical blow." Sage said with a chuckle.

Jill was shaken a bit by his ranting. "…I think I'll…just go back to the caves and let Metal have some alone time…" she said, as she started to walk off.

Once Ani got back to her feet, she watched Jill walk away with some disdain. "Wait!" she called, stopping Jill and getting her attention. "Do you really have to go Jill?" she asked with drooped ears.

"…yeah," Jill said, walking away again. "…I'll see you guys another time…"

Hunter blinked while he looked at Metal, and then at Jill who disappeared into the wilderness. "…is there something I'm missing here?" he asked. "I'd never imagine seeing those two acting so… casually around each other."

"...they do seem to have some sort of bond between them..." Sage mused, as she glanced at Jill. "How interesting..."

" *Hey!* " Metal suddenly called, as he glanced at Ani. " *If you want to see your friends immediately, I can warp you to the clubhouse. I should have enough energy left to send you there.* "

Before Ani could answer, Hunter stepped in. "I know you want to see your friends, but not today. Not when the full moon is tonight, and just because we sapped the Corruption out of you, doesn't mean you can't change under the moon. You *are* my daughter after all…"

"Aw…" Ani groaned, folding her arms. "…having a dad bites."

Well, it'll only be for tonight, Ani." Sage said, as she glanced at Metal. "Cooled off, yet?"

" *Not by a long shot.* " Metal muttered. " *Well, take care.* "

"Will do." Sage nodded, as she glanced at Hunter and Ani, lifting them in the air. "Hang on tight; we're going home!" Then, she took off, pulling Ani and Hunter after her.

"Whoa!" Ani uttered. "I still can't get used to that!"

"Don't worry, you will…" Hunter groaned.

Sage only chuckled. "At least we'll get back sooner, this way." she said, as they were well on their way home with an impressive speed.

...well, its official, now. Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. *And here I hoped that it'd remain a secret... well, I'll have to regain my reputation after we've dealt with Callous.*

Aw, boohoo…well, what can you expect? No good deed goes unpunished, you know. It seemed like now was a good time for the voice in his head to bug him again.

You just love hearing yourself mock me, don't you? Metal thought with an annoyed look.

As a matter of fact, yes, I do.

...you're telling me that you have nothing better to do? At that point, Metal placed a hand against his head. *I've already told you; I'm not going to just become Jill's friend, alright? That's obviously what you want me to do, so if I'm not doing it, then go bug someone else.*

Oh no, I'm not going to bug you about that anymore… the voice chuckled. *I decided that I'm just going to do something else to you.*

Suddenly, Metal could somehow feel a sharp pain strike his leg.

" *AGH!* " Metal cried out, as he held his leg in pain. *Wha... what the hell was that?* he thought.

That's pain, Metal, the voice cackled. *So tell me…what's it like to feel it for the first time?*

Another sharp pain hit him in his arm.

AAGH! The pain jolting through him caused him to grab his arm as well. *How... how are you even doing that? I'm not supposed to feel anything like this!*

As I said once before… the voice started to change from sounding like Metal, to a very much despised feminine voice that Metal could recognize. *Corruption can happen to anyone and anything…*

...Callous... Metal thought, as his eyes narrowed. *...so YOU'RE the one who's been pestering me all day!* The Metallix snarled, as he got on his feet. *Where the hell are you? Are you too scared to keep to our wager?*

No, just thought I'd poke fun at you, Callous' voice chuckled, just as Metal felt a stabbing pain in his chest. *You know…with a needle and a little doll of you.*

" *HNGH!* " Keeling over, Metal grabbed hold of his gut, a murderous look in his eyes. *...that thing... I forgot about that entirely...* he thought, as he closed his eyes. *So, what? What was the purpose of trying to make me befriend Jill?*

That's for me to know, and you to find out, Toaster, Callous' teased. *In the meantime, you can't stop what's happening to you.* That stabbing pain began to dig deeper and deeper into Metal.

" *AGH!* " Gripping his chest, Metal collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily. *...oh, yeah?* he thought, as he glanced down at his hands. *If it's Corruption, I can dispel it with this!* At that point, Purity coated his arms, as he pressed down on his body.

But nothing happened. Metal still felt the pain.

Haha, Callous laughed at him. *You can't dispel Corruption that's not there…*

His eyes widening, the Purity quickly faded away. *...damn bitch...* Metal thought, as he punched the ground, before stumbling to his feet. *But I can endure this... I've been through worse!*

I doubt it… Callous' voice murmured. *…but I can let you off for now.* Immediately, the pain was completely gone after she said that. *Just keep in mind what I can do to you.*

...you're not getting away with this. Metal thought, as he got on his feet. *The wager still stands. And Jill is going to defeat you. Keep that in mind... little Callous.*

Sure, whatever… Callous' voice muttered, not sounding all that concerned.

...now, if you don't mind, I'll start ignoring you from now on. Metal thought, as he folded his arms. *And if you still want me to become friends with her, don't expect any miracles. With that said... ta-ta.*

Another sharp pain hit his foot. *You won't be able to ignore me entirely…*

...I can damn well try. Metal thought, as he resisted the urge to yell out in pain. *Now, I believe that I said 'ta-ta'?*

Fine… And the pain was soothed from his foot.

Thank you. Metal thought, as he began moving towards the cave. *I'll be seeing you later, when the fight begins..*

"Well, I didn't expect that," Callous said, "but at least I still have him under my thumb."

"...expect what? He found you out?" Johnny inquired, as he raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, but even if he did, he still couldn't stop me from torturing him," Callous said.

"Well, as long as we still got him under check." Johnny noted. "You'll go through with using him as planned, right?"

"Yep," Callous answered. "That little bit he's unaware of, so I'll go ahead and use that, but only as a last resort."

"Hm." Johnny nodded. "...but I do have to ask; why do you need him

to start acting friendly with Jill? Are you aiming for a low blow against her?"

"Precisely," Callous answered again. "No matter how tough she might be, her heart can still be easily crushed."

"Now that's just cruel." Johnny noted, before chuckling. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You know what else was quite cruel?" Callous teased. "How you could effectively seduce me earlier…I'd have to say that you learned how to manipulate me, didn't you?"

"I guess I just have that effect on women..." Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at his hand. "...though it could've been Corruption that helped me do that. I wouldn't know, though; I still need to practice with this stuff."

"And practice you shall," Callous said, suspending balls of darkness over her hands. "Catch it without it disappearing," then she threw it at Johnny.

"Hm." As it flew at him, Johnny reached out and grabbed the sphere just as it came close to him, before glancing at his palm, to see if the ball was still intact.

Judging how careful he was, it remained suspended above his palm.

"Nice," Callous commented.

"Guess I'm a fast learner." Johnny mused, as he lightly tossed the ball up and down a few times, keeping an eye on it.

"That's certainly a plus," Callous said, bringing out more balls of darkness. "But let's see how you fare with a short game of tennis." Then she launched them at him. "This time, try and deflect it back at me."

With a nod, Johnny clenched his fists, as he watched the spheres fly at him. Then, when each sphere got close enough, he struck them with his fists, intending to knock them back that way.

But he only succeeded in destroying them, not hurling them back.

"You've got to be gentler with them," Callous instructed. "Don't punch them. Just lightly take your hands and move them out and away." Then she shot some more at Johnny to try again.

Nodding, Johnny opened his fists up, watching the spheres. This time when they got close, he allowed them to get close to his palms, before pushing them back at Callous, without using too much force.

"There we go," Callous said, as she juggled around the returning balls of darkness that rebounded from Johnny. "With Corruption, you have to let it come to you."

"Is that so..." Johnny noted, as he glanced at his hands. "You can't be too hasty when dealing with it, right?"

"Right, or the Corruption can backfire and eat you from the inside out," Callous finished juggling and allowed the balls of darkness to disappear.

"Well, I'll know to take my time in using it, then." Johnny said with a nod, as he clenched his hands into fists again.

"In the meantime…we could hunt down Cal," Callous chuckled. "I still think we can get some use out of him now that he can use Corruption, but he hasn't much of a clue how to use it. That still makes him vulnerable."

"Well, if we have a plan..." Johnny began, as he glanced at Callous with a smirk. "...then let's get going."

"Oh, I've got a plan," Callous said, walking right past Johnny; lightly tapping his shoulder in the process as a subtle gesture of likeness while walking on. "We just get that Corruption to go to his head."

"That ought to be easy enough." Johnny noted, as he followed Callous. "Just force him into using Corruption too hastily, and it ought to work from there."

"And to do that, we could get Bloom and Gloom to join so we gang up on him," Callous muttered.

"Whew! We made it by sunset!" Hunter huffed with relief, walking through the door.

"I wonder if anyone noticed we were gone…" Ani said.

"It wouldn't surprise me; you weren't exactly subtle about the way you left, Ani." Sage noted, as she closed the door after the three went into the HQ.

The three encountered Boomer first in the hall, who was leaning against the wall with a troubled look. First Charmy had fallen into his depression, and now others were missing. Thankfully, she looked up to see them in the hall. "Guys!" She said, jumping to her feet. "Where were you?"

"Ani decided to roam around," Hunter said.

Boomer was shocked to see Ani as her ordinary self. "…did you guys figure out how to help her?" she asked.

"We found some help outdoors." Sage said with a slight smile, as she rubbed Ani's head.

"They're back?" At that point, Newt came walking down the hall, letting out a sigh of relief at the sight of the three. "For a moment, I was really getting worried, y'know..."

"Was everyone else worried?" Hunter asked.

"…as far as I'm concerned, the others didn't know," Boomer said with a shrug. "Well, they were busy with their own thing…I don't know; it didn't really occur to me to tell them."

"Oh really?" Hunter asked, looking teasingly at Boomer. "In that case, what were you doing while you waited for us to get back?"

Boomer glared at Hunter, knowing what he was implying. "It wasn't like that Hunter," She grumbled. "We were trying to help out the Captain…"

"Yeah, he's really down in the dumps, y'know..." Newt muttered, as he folded his arms.

"...I can imagine why..." Sage muttered, as she closed her eyes.

Ani yawned.

"Alright, off to bed," Hunter said, pushing Ani along.

"What? But it was just one little yawn!" Ani protested. "That doesn't make me tired!"

"I'm your father; it doesn't matter," Hunter said.

"Oh, right! Like you're going to use that excuse!" Ani grumbled.

"It's a reasonable excuse," Hunter argued.

Once the two were gone, Boomer chuckled. "You know…I'm starting to see where Ani gets her bad attitude."

"Me too." Sage chuckled. "I'd hate to see her get tangled up with a tiger cub around her age; the last thing we need is a younger edition of King and Hunter back in the day..."

Boomer groaned, "Don't say things like that. You might jinx fate…"

"Ah, sorry." Sage said with a mild laugh. "I get carried away some times..."

"Well, now what?" Boomer asked. "As far as I'm concerned, all the drama for the day is done and over with…well, except for the drama the Captain's going through."

"Oh, yes..." Sage nodded, as she sighed. "Poor guy. If I found out that someone who's already proven to be pure evil had killed one of my friends long ago..."

"Wait, woah..." Newt began, as he looked at Sage with a stunned look. "...how did you-"

"Do I even *need* to answer that?" Sage noted, as she tapped the side of her head.

"I have to admit it's kind of disturbing how you do that," Boomer

remarked.

"Oh, you wouldn't know disturbing just by me reading minds, Boomer." Sage said with a chuckle. "Believe me; I've done some disturbing things back in the day; things I really hope not to do again."

Boomer decided not to question what Sage had done. "I'm curious, Sage," she said. "Have you read any real disturbing thoughts?"

"...I've read all sorts of thoughts." Sage said, as she closed her eyes. "A good deal of them hasn't exactly been pleasant... if I told anyone just a fraction of what I've read, it could give them nightmares for years..."

"Sounds tough." Newt mused. "How do ya avoid going completely nuts?"

"Practice, I guess." Sage shrugged.

"Incredible," Boomer murmured.

"Just take my word for it, that it's best to have this kind of power when you're practically a kid; you get more time to get used to it that way." Sage said, as she glanced out of the window.

Boomer nodded. "I agree." Shortly, she turned and walked down the hall. "I'm going to check on the Captain."

"Ah- I'll come with ya!" Newt said, as he ran after Boomer.

...Jill and Metal, together... Sage thought, as she closed her eyes. *...I do wonder how that's going to turn out...*

Chapter 53

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

"Professor?" Brick muttered, shaking the sleeping fox by the shoulder. Poor Tails seemed to have fallen asleep at his desk, and now that it was nighttime, Natal had taken the kids back to the Clubhouse while Brick remained here to look over Tails.

"Professor!" he called, trying to shake him awake.

"...ungh..." Tails groaned, as he let out a yawn, before glancing at Brick. "...oh... hi, Brick." he said drowsily.

"C'mon Professor," Brick said, giving Tails a light pat on the back to keep him awake. "Let's get you to bed."

"...yes, of course." Tails nodded, as he slowly moved away from his desk, before glancing at Brick. "The others have gone home?"

"Yep," Brick answered.

"Ah, I see..." Tails muttered, as he closed his eyes.

"I just wanted to make sure you were taken care of before I left," Brick said.

"Yes, of course..." Tails nodded, as he began walking towards his bedroom, waiting for Brick to follow him.

And Brick did follow, just to make sure that Tails made it to bed without collapsing in the middle of the hall. After all, he was old and he didn't have very much energy as it is. "Again...sorry about the hole in the wall..." Brick murmured, suddenly thinking about that.

"Like I said... don't worry about it." Tails replied, as he stopped by one door, which he opened, leading into his bedroom. "You, Proxy and Whisker can probably come by tomorrow and fix it up."

"Yeah..." Brick said, scratching his head. "...Professor, are you going

to be okay? With the news I told you...you were pretty devastated."

"I still am." Tails replied, as he closed his eyes. "But... I know that Sonic... wouldn't want me to keep grieving over him."

Brick nodded silently in agreement. "...well, I'll see you in the morning then," he said. "I hope you sleep well."

"Same to you, Brick." Tails said with a slight smile, as he moved towards his bed, letting out another yawn.

Brick closed the door behind Tails after making sure that he had gotten into bed, and after checking up on some other things, Brick exited his shop and took off on his gear into the jungle to head back to the Clubhouse. For awhile he enjoyed a silent ride, while thinking about a various many things. The news he learned was very tragic, but to think that the same killer was still out there, waiting to be released from that black emerald...it was very disturbing for the bull to think.

He hoped that Jill wasn't under too much pressure, and that she was doing okay.

He sure missed her.

Suddenly, he was whacked off his Gear and he landed on his back harshly. The wind was knocked out of him, so he didn't get a chance to utter any curses while he discovered a katana pressed against his neck.

"Hello, Brick-head," growled Cal.

"Oh great, it's you," groaned Brick, barely regaining his ability to breathe. "What the hell do you want now?"

"I thought maybe I'd get a chance to get some payback," he said, opening his hand to show Brick a ball of suspended darkness.

Brick's eyes widened. "...is that Corruption?" he uttered. "How the hell did you get a hold of that?"

"You don't want to know; believe me," Cal murmured.

"Look, what are you going to gain from getting revenge on me?" Brick said, glaring at him. "You just can't let things go, can you? Whatever happened to 'keeping your feelings from interfering with your work,' huh?"

"...for some reason, I can't let it go," Cal uttered. "I just...I bear such hatred and jealousy against you because she's with you..." The ball of darkness above his palm began to pulse powerfully.

"That's understandable, but still," Brick said. "You're a freaken' cyborg! Didn't Metal turn you into that with the intention of getting rid of those feelings?"

"That's true Brick," said another voice, "but Metal didn't count on how Corruption would affect him." The monkey and the bull saw Callous walk out from the shady darkness of one of the trees. "After all, it brings out the worst in people."

"I suppose that for some people, that's a bad thing." another voice chuckled, as Johnny stepped out next to Callous, smirking. "But for others... it's a whole different story."

"...crap..." Brick uttered when he saw the two of them.

Cal took the katana that was up to Brick's neck and pointed it at the two newcomers instead. "What's your purpose here?" he asked.

"Why, we're here for you, Cal," Callous said. "But the Cowboy here's a bonus."

Brick grit his teeth while he turned angrily red. "...for the sake of humanity...I'm not a COWBOY!" After a sudden cackle of childish voices though, Brick found himself snatched up by Bloom and Gloom and held against a tree. Even if he struggled, he was pinned. Callous passed by him with a smirk.

"Say all you want," she said, with a finger under his chin. "I know that you won't lay a hand on me."

"...Brick, what is she talking about?" Cal asked.

Brick turned away shamefully, mumbling something.

"...what?" Cal didn't hear him.

"I said...I don't hit girls."

"...are you serious?" Cal grumbled in annoyance.

"How pitiful is that?" Callous mocked.

"So, guess that we outnumber you people." Johnny said with a chuckle, as he cracked his neck. "So, Callous... you can deal with the monkey, and we'll take care of the cowboy, alright?"

At that point, Cal'd pick up a very familiar signal, bolting towards their current position.

Cal glanced away when he felt this signal, which caused Callous to look curiously at him. "Now what?" she groaned.

"...leave Uncle Cal ALONE!" At that point, Tails Doll suddenly flew right in between Cal and Callous, glaring at the ewe with a look that was meant to be intimidating, but given what he is, it only came off as adorable. *"I won't let you touch him!"*

"...okay, what the hell is that?" Johnny uttered with a clueless look.

"Tails Doll?" Brick looked at the doll in questioning.

"THAT'S the doll that kept us from getting into the Clubhouse!" Bloom pointed out.

"Is that so?" Callous murmured. Once she looked Tails Doll over, she chuckled in amusement. "Kind of adorable if you ask me."

"I'll make you pay for wanting to hurt Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll said, as he suddenly glanced at Cal. *"Uncle Cal, cover Brick and you! I'll use that to stop them!"*

"...use what?" Johnny uttered, as he folded his arms. "Is the plushie really trying to come off as scary?"

"Who knows," Callous said with a shrug.

Cal looked at Tails Doll, and then at Brick. It was quiet, until he suddenly made a dash for Brick, making everyone act that instant.

"Oh no you don't!" Callous said, rushing at Cal as she shot Corruption at him.

Being ninja, Cal leaped over and ducked under each throw as he continued to make his way to Brick.

"You little..." Johnny grunted, as he rushed at Cal, reeling his fist back. "Why can't you just stay still?"

At that point, Cal'd hear a familiar message in his mind. TEMPORARY AUTOPILOT OF AGENT SNITCH: ACTIVATED. Before Cal could react, his own body leapt right over Johnny the moment he tried punching the monkey, before Cal successfully grabbed Brick by his face, covering his nose and mouth, whilst a mask covered Cal's face.

"Alright, we got him in one place!" Johnny said, as he glanced at Callous. "Come on, blast-"

"Prepare for reckoning!" Suddenly, the gem above Tails Doll popped open, as an orange-colored gas emerged from it, quickly covering everyone present, forcing them to inhale it, with the exception of Brick and Cal, who were covered up. *"Now... let us see what you truly fear."*

Bloom and Gloom no longer held Brick in place while they coughed.

"…big deal," Callous murmured, after she finished coughing. "I don't fear anything."

Johnny eventually stopped coughing as well. "...neither do I." he scoffed.

"Lies." Tails Doll uttered in a dark voice. *"Every creation in the entire universe, organic or not, has something they fear."* Then, a dark void began swallowing Callous, Johnny, Bloom and Gloom up. *"They may not admit it... but it's the truth. Now, let us see what you fear."*

At that point, the darkness consumed all of them, and when they'd

realize what happened, they'd see that they were no longer in the woods. As it turned out, while Bloom and Gloom were together, both Johnny and Callous were completely alone, with none of their partners in sight.

With Bloom and Gloom, the two butterflies would eventually see a mystical red light in the distance. *...what do you fear?* they'd hear some hypnotic voice ask them.

"S…spiders…" uttered Gloom, while Bloom refused to respond.

Is that so... the voice uttered, as the light grew stronger. *...anything else?*

"That's-s all…" Gloom muttered, and Bloom still fought to respond.

...and you? Now, the light was glowing with an immense force. *Do not be shy... impart your deepest fears onto me...*

"…I'm afraid of…being laughed at…" Bloom gave in at the last minute.

...I see...

At that point, they'd hear something behind them; something that sounded like a swarm.

Gloom grabbed her sister insecurely. "W-w-what am I h-hearing?" she stuttered fearfully.

Below you.

At that point, the two would be able to see what was making that sound; a massive, never-ending swarm of spiders, surrounding the two. And if that wasn't enough, the spiders were making some form of other noise.

Laughter.

While Gloom clung to her sister for fear of the spiders, Bloom clung back at the fear of the laughter. They both screamed like the little girls they were.

The spiders continued to laugh, as they slowly began encircling the butterflies.

Yes... scream for me... let me taste your fear...

At that point, they'd also hear a booming laughter from behind them, as they heard something big approach them.

"Someone help us!" screamed Bloom, while Gloom began to cry hysterically.

No one is coming to help you...

At that point, they'd see what it was that was approaching them; a massive, demonic-looking spider, who let out a terrifying laughter, whilst advancing towards the butterflies, along with all the other spiders.

Now... SCREAM!

And the butterflies did scream. They screamed bloody murder like they never had before…

In another part of the void, Callous only looked around. "I don't see how this should scare me. I feel right at home in darkness like this…"

...believe me... you will be horrified...

Elsewhere in the void, Johnny looked around him with a bewildered expression, as he heard Bloom and Gloom's screams. "What the... what's going on?" he uttered, just as he saw a bright light ahead of him.

Tell me... what do you fear?

"...is that some trick question?" Johnny scoffed, as he glared at the light. "I told you; I don't fear anything!"

Do not delude yourself; you must fear something.

"I don't!" Johnny protested. "You know, I've been through hell on

earth. What makes you think that there'd be anything left in this world to scare me?"

...well, why don't we take a look at that?

At that point, Johnny noticed several figures slowly lumbering towards him. And as it turned out, it was zombified versions of many of the people who died fifteen years ago, including Prowler, Sprinter, Bliss and Desperado.

However, Johnny only chuckled at this sight. "What, that's it? Old friends that I get to kill again? This is like a birthday gift!" he chuckled, as he prepared to move towards them...

...but he fell, unable to actually move. "What? Why can't I move my legs?"

You've killed many people... taken away their right to exist... but now that you can't defend yourself... they want revenge...

As the zombies continued to advance towards Johnny, he growled, as he desperately tried getting up, but to no avail. "Shit! Why is this happening now?" he cursed, as the zombies were only getting closer. "Damn freaks... get away!" he yelled, but to no avail. "I SAID GET AWAY!"

...they want revenge... and they will have it...

Hearing Johnny call out, Callous looked around for him, and Bloom and Gloom's scream weren't helping.

"Alright, that's a pretty good trick, I'll admit," Callous said, "but what makes you think it'll work on me?"

You'll soon find out... At that point, a bright, red light in the distance began glowing. *Tell me... what do you fear...?*

"Hello? I'm practically the Princess of Darkness here," Callous said, folding her arms as she was not amused by the things happening.

Do not avoid the question.

At that point, chains suddenly erupted around Callous, quickly encircling her so she was completely unable to move. And if that wasn't enough, the bright light only grew stronger.

What do you fear?

"Wha?" The chains had taken her by surprise, and she struggled to try and break free, but only to find them tightening.

"I'm not afraid of anything you stupid little doll!" Callous yelled, clearly ticked off.

Do not lie to yourself.

At that point, the chains suddenly moved so that Callous was forced into a kneeling position, tightening so she was absolutely stuck in that position.

Fear is a trait we all possess. We cannot deny it, no matter how much we want to.

At that point, the red light was suddenly swapped with a white, almost godly light, seemingly glowing brighter than the sun itself.

Callous' eyes widened when she saw this white glow, so she worked even harder to struggle out of the chains, closing her eyes to the light she didn't want to see.

However, smaller chains suddenly forced her eyes open, as her head was pulled up so she had no way of looking away from the light.

Your actions contradict your words... you really are *afraid of something.*

Slowly, the bright light was approaching Callous, and in the middle of the light was a figure she would have hoped never to look at like this.

Goddess.

"…no…" she uttered weakly.

Goddess was silent, as she simply looked at Callous with a scornful, yet pitying look at the same time, whilst she advanced towards the trapped ewe, the holy light slowly engulfing the dark void she traversed on.

...do not deny it. Go on, Callous; embrace your fear. Let it overtake your mind... let nothing but fear linger!

Callous trembled at the sight of Goddess. At first, it seemed like she would let her fear take over her…

…but something else arose in her that didn't arise in the twins or Johnny.

"…no," she said. "I won't let my fear overtake me…for you see, you little rag doll…"

Her green eyes changed with a red glow, as a small wicked grin began to crawl across her face.

"…I can not only learn how to conquer my fears," she chuckled. "… but I can turn the fear around…"

Let the darkness in your heart run amok… spoke an entirely different voice in the void; a male, raspy voice that was deep, and dark. *Do not fear…but in fact, become that fear to use against others…*

Darkness oozed from Callous' body, which surprisingly enough began to melt the chains that bound her.

"… *Daddy's back…"* Callous' cackled, with her voice changing in a demented fashion.

...what? The first dark voice uttered, as even Goddess looked around in bewilderment.

...no. The fear will consume you. Succumb, and drown in the abyss of your own mind!

At that point, Goddess' eyes gleamed with a dangerous green, as more chains began erupting around Callous; these ones, however,

were glowing as brightly as she did, quickly ensnaring Callous.

But Callous just continued to grin at Goddess, as her efforts to chain her down were futile. The darkness only took onto those chains and continued to eat away, even for how brightly they were glowing.

And she laughed. *"…I'm not afraid of you anymore…"* Callous uttered. In order to get this powerful however, Callous had gone off the deep end and was looking at Goddess with a psychotic, murderous grin.

...okay, this didn't exactly go as planned... At that point, Goddess was looking at Callous with a concerned look.

...well, it provided a distraction, at least! GANGWAY!

At that point, everything around Callous shattered, and before she knew it, she, Johnny, Bloom and Gloom were back in the jungle.

"Ugh..." Johnny uttered, as he looked around. "What the hell was that?" he yelled, as he got to his feet. "Tsch... well, back to..." At that point, Johnny realized something else; Tails Doll, Cal and Brick were gone. "...damn... they bailed on us!"

Callous gripped her head in agony. Having gone that route, she allowed the Corruption to momentarily take over her, and that hurt. Having such a good control on it though, she managed to snap out of it once they were out of the void.

"…I…I-I-I was never so s-scared in my l-life!" This time, it was Bloom who did the stuttering, while she nearly choked Gloom with her hold. Shortly after, Gloom shoved her sister away, while looking at Callous worriedly.

"…a-are you…?" she tried to ask.

"…I'm fine," Callous grumbled. "I didn't want to do that though, and it pisses me off when someone pushes me that far."

"Ugh... how the hell can a doll possibly know how to do that?" Johnny uttered in anger, as he folded his arms. "Sheesh... any closer, and I'd have my ex rip my throat out..."

Callous couldn't stop from laughing out loud. "So, that was your fear huh?" Then she closed her eyes, smiling. "Well, I suppose I have to thank that doll. Now I'm not afraid of that damn woman anymore…"

"Hey, it wasn't just her, alright?" Johnny protested, before he folded his arms. "Apart from Bloom, Gloom and the renegades... just about everyone from those days went after me as zombies... and I couldn't attack them." Scoffing, he glanced at the butterflies. "Just what did the doll do to you two?"

Bloom was rocking back and forth in the fetal position. "…Spiders… they were…laughing at us…"

Callous looked at Gloom curiously. "Why aren't you as scared as her?"

Gloom shrugged. "I-I'm used to fear…I kn-now how to c-cope with it."

"…I'll never get the two of you…" Callous grumbled. Then something crossed her mind. "Oh…Daddy's back."

Bloom perked up from her traumatizing seizure and Gloom jolted in surprise. "He's back?" they both exclaimed simultaneously. "How do you know?"

"His voice reached me," Callous chuckled. "And that requires a very powerful use of Corruption…so it's likely that he's gotten strong enough to break free from his prison."

"...so he's back, eh?" Johnny chuckled. "Well, what do you know... do you think he's thinking of finding you?"

"Probably," Callous said. "But it might be easier for us to go see him…after all, I know where he is."

"Where?" both Bloom and Gloom asked.

"Why, Angel Island of course," she chuckled.

"Then let's go see him." Johnny chuckled. "It'll be interesting to finally meet him..."

" *How did that happen? She actually broke through my fear-gas, Uncle Cal!* " At the moment, Tails Doll and Cal were bolting it through the woods, with Cal carrying Brick over his shoulder, in spite of what Cal wanted to do to the bull.

"Yeah, that is pretty unnerving," Cal remarked.

" *And that's not all...* " Tails Doll continued. " *There was this other voice that broke through my illusion! I'm supposed to be the only one who can make that dark voice when people inhale the gas; not even Big Bro can do that!* "

"I'm willing to bet it's that Deity bastard," Brick growled.

"That's the most likely possibility," Cal said, surprisingly agreeing with Brick for once.

" *But how? Big Bro placed him in a capsule with no button, and planted him on Angel Island!* " Tails Doll said, as he glanced at Cal and Brick. " *He can't have broken out, or anything! I mean, the capsule had no button! NO BUTTON!* "

"Metal still considered the possibility that it could be broken open from the inside," Cal said. "And there's no clue how powerful Deity is. From the looks of it though, he could very well be strong enough to break it open by himself…"

" *...even without a button!* " Tails Doll uttered, as he looked ahead. " *I have to let Big Bro know about this! Hang on a second...* "

"And for the love of God, can you put me down?" Brick yelled.

"Fine," and once they stopped; Cal did so much as simply drop the bull onto the ground hard. That did not brighten Brick's mood one bit.

" *...Uncle Cal...* " Tails Doll uttered, as he looked up at the monkey. " *...Big Bro wants to talk to you."*

"Alright," Cal said, pressing his ear; or the device in his ear to tap

into his internal communicator.

Cal here.

Calculate, Tails Doll just gave me the low-down. You're unharmed, right? Metal responded.

Yes, we're fine, Cal transmitted.

Brick glanced at Tails Doll. "Can you really tell what someone is afraid of?"

" *Mhm.* " Tails Doll nodded. " *That's what Daddy made me for; to try and take down Sonic and his buddies by exploiting their fears. But he was a bit scared of me, so he didn't use me too much...* "

Good... Metal uttered, before he sighed. *...Goddamn it all... Callous is making these last few days a hell for me... and now you want me to believe that Novagod has been freed?*

Unfortunately so, Cal responded, while observing Brick's rather surprised expression that he shot at Tails Doll.

Great... and Callous is still interested in you, for some reason... Metal grumbled. *I'm sure that you're going to hate me for this... but I'm giving you new orders, for your own safety. You'll be staying with Jill's friends. I'll inform her of this as soon as possible.*

" *...is something wrong, Brick?* " Tails Doll asked, as he innocently tilted his head.

"..nothing," Brick replied to Tails Doll. "Don't worry about me."

Cal sighed in disdain at the news. *You sure that's for my own safety? I'm not exactly on good terms with them…especially the bull.*

I'm sorry, but if Callous still wants you, then you're going to need someone to look after you. I know you can use Corruption, but you just found out about it, right? Metal said, before sighing. *It's only temporary; once Jill defeats Callous, we'll head back to Westopolis and try to forget that any of this has happened.*

Let's hope so… Cal replied.

All right... I'll impart this onto Jill. And in the meantime... try not to make a complete fool of yourself, Cal. Then, the line went dead.

Easy for you to say, Cal thought, while he turned to Brick and Tails Doll. "Metal ordered that I stay with you in your…Clubhouse."

"…say *WHAT?"* Brick bellowed, jumping to his feet. "Who the hell does Metal think he is? We don't need *YOUR* help!"

"It wasn't for *YOUR* safety!" Cal argued, while the two of them butt heads literally. "According to him, *I'm* the one in need of safety!"

"That's no excuse!" Brick barked, locking vicious eyes that transported a rivalry spark. "I don't want *YOU* around the kids AT ALL!"

"Well unfortunately you don't have a say in it!" Cal yelled. "Believe me, I would've agreed to *ANYTHING* else!"

"IT'S JUST YOUR FAULT THAT YOU'RE SUCH A WIMP, MONKEY-BREATH!"

"LOOK WHO'S TALKING! YOU JUST SAID YOU WOULDN'T HIT A GIRL, NOSE-RING!"

" *GUUUUUYS!* " Tails Doll suddenly yelled, as he fluttered in-between the two. " *I do NOT want to see you two fighting each other! If Uncle Cal is staying, we're all going to be friends! GOT THAT?* " After that little outburst, Tails Doll was quick to glare at both Brick and Cal.

Both of them turned their backs to each other and folded their arms in disapproval.

"We AREN'T going to be friends," Brick specified. "In fact, when we get to the Clubhouse, I refuse to be in the same room with him."

"Likewise," Cal added.

" *...fine. You two don't need to be friends, but you two* can *act like*

grown-ups, alright? " Tails Doll said, as he fluttered above them. " *I mean, for crying out loud, you guys make Striker and Jack look like the Professor and Big Bro in terms of maturity!* "

Brick's eyes opened wide when he suddenly realized something. "… I left my gear back there!" He uttered, whirling around to take off.

Then Cal snatched Brick by his tail before he could get any farther. "I'm sure you can go get it in the morning when we're less susceptible to being kidnapped in the dark," he murmured, pulling Brick by the tail as they walked toward the direction of the Clubhouse.

"OW! Damn it! That HURTS!" Brick screamed.

"Would you rather I pulled you by your nose ring?"

"…point taken," Brick grumbled, yanking his tail out of Cal's hand while the two of them started walking onward.

Glancing at the two, Tails Doll let out a sigh. *Big Bro, is this a good idea? Letting those two in the same building together?*

As long as Proxy is on the ready in case Calculate is pulled into the dark, it is a good idea. Now make sure that they don't get in trouble.

...alright, Big Bro. Tails Doll nodded, as he fluttered after the two.

Jill was no longer in the cave. In fact, she found a perch above the mouth of the cave, and having transformed back into her Holy Form, she fluttered up there. She discovered that the cave was indented in the side of a cliff, and when she got to the top of it, she could see the entire woods from above the treetops. One glance at the full moon, and she was lost in a trance of content as she sat there.

For the longest time, she stared at that full moon on the night it came.

Even in the darkness…the moon shines bright, she thought. *It shines so brightly that it lights up the night…*

She never knew where that poetic thought came from, but that was

why she felt calm. Even the dark times she wandered alone and hopelessly…she would look up at a full, round, silver moon in the sky, and suddenly everything would be okay.

" *I was wondering where you went, Jill.* " she'd hear Metal say, as he appeared behind her, before glancing up at the full moon. " *...quite a sight, isn't it?* "

" *It is,"* she agreed, with her eyes squinting thoughtfully as she stared at it. *"…have you calmed down now?"*

" *Well... yes and no.* " Metal responded, as he sat down next to Jill, looking up at the moon. " *I've calmed down about the fact that practically everyone knows that I'm training you... but there's something else that has me worried.* "

Jill didn't move; her eyes remained locked with the moon. *"What is it?"*

" *...this might come as a shock to you, so don't say that I didn't warn you.* " Metal said with a sigh, before he glanced at Jill. " *I spoke with Calculate earlier... and supposedly...* " Then, he looked back at the moon. " *...Novagod is free.* "

Jill shot Metal widened eyes, and she was speechless that moment.

"… *how did he find out* ?" she finally uttered.

" *...Callous and Johnny ambushed him, along with Brick.* " Metal began, as he closed his eyes. " *Tails Doll was there, and attempted to take them down with his fear gas... but Callous conquered her fears. And supposedly, a dark voice pierced through Tails Doll's illusion.* " Then, he glanced at Jill. " *Calculate deduced that it was Deity.* "

That sent shivers up Jill's spine. Remembering what she went through, it was bad to think that Callous conquered her fears as well.

That, and she grew very concerned about Brick.

" *Are they okay?"* She asked worriedly. *"Callous and Johnny haven't done anything to Brick have they?"*

" *Don't worry; they're safe.* " Metal said. " *Tails Doll and Calculate wisely got out of there when it seemed like Callous would break out of her illusion on her own.* " Then, he snapped his fingers. " *That's right... since Callous wants Calculate for some reason, I decided... to have him stay at the Clubhouse.* "

Jill gave Metal a surprised look, and then sighed in exhaust. *"That's going to cause more trouble than we're asking for…"*

"Blame Callous; she's the one who doesn't intend on playing fair." Metal said with a huff, before looking back up at the moon. *"...Jill. I... need you to promise me something again."*

"What is it?" she asked.

"...when your fight with Callous comes up..." Metal began, as he closed his eyes. *"...promise me that no matter what happens, you will not forfeit the match."*

Jill looked at Metal long and hard, before she nodded. *"I promise,"* she said.

"...thank you." Metal muttered, before he looked back at the moon. *"Well... that took a load off my shoulders."*

Jill looked at the moon again. *"...two more days to train,"* she murmured. " *And the third will be the battle..."*

"...actually, Jill, I want to try a different approach on our training when morning comes." Metal said, as he glanced at Jill. *"How efficient are you in hand-to-hand combat ?"*

"Decent," She responded, with eyes locked on the moon again.

"We'll have to aim higher than decent." Metal noted, as he looked up at the moon as well. *"You've probably always fought* Deity *and Callous with your holy blade... so imagine their surprise when you start thrashing them with your own body instead."* At that, he couldn't help but chuckle.

Jill looked curiously at him. *"What's so funny?"*

"Oh, nothing..." Metal chuckled. *"I just... imagined you literally kicking Callous' ass."*

"Heh," Jill let out a bit of a dry laugh and looked at the moon again. *"She'll certainly have it coming..."*

"Indeed she will..." Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. *...and so will Novagod.* he thought.

"...if I do defeat Callous, and she's eliminated from the competition, what should we do about Johnny, the twins, or even Deity?" Jill asked. *"I haven't been able to successfully kill Deity before..."*

"...you can leave that to me." Metal said, as he cracked his neck. *"If you and Callous weren't sharing a soul, I'd have killed her myself... I'm sure I can do the same to Johnny and the twins."* Then, he glanced at Jill. *"Who knows; maybe we can gang up on Deity as well?"*

"...I'd like that," Jill admitted.

Chuckling, Metal looked back at the moon. *"...what irony. The one poised to take over the world... now saving it."*

"Yeah, it is kind of ironic," Jill agreed. *"But after this is all over...we'll be enemies again."*

"...to be honest, it'd be a breath of fresh air *, after what's happened in our lives."* Metal mused. *"Still... I have to admit, I'll probably miss this a bit."*

"...me too," Jill murmured, looking away completely.

"Hey." At that point, Metal placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. *"We've got two days of training left... so let's make the most out of them."*

"Okay," Jill said, nodding. After one last glance at the moon, Jill stood up. *"I should get some rest..."* she murmured.

"You do that." Metal nodded, as he glanced at the moon as well. *"I'll*

stay up for a while longer..."

"Good night Metal," Jill said, before she took a step off the cliff and floated back down slowly, entering back into the cave later on.

"... good night *, Jill."* Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *Callous... I don't care if you have the ability to torture me... Jill is going to defeat you. And then... your daddy's next.* he thought.

Chapter 54

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

"So, let me get this straight..." At the moment, the GUN Agents (aside from Hunter), along with the GUN commander, were in a discussion with Newt and Boomer. "...Metal Sonic is training Jill in order for her to defeat Callous?" Wiper inquired with a raised eyebrow.

"Yep," Boomer said with a sarcastic look. "Crazy, ain't it?"

"It's absurd." Queen mused, as she folded her arms. "A complete 180 since I last saw the Metallix..."

"Kekekekeke! What do you suppose he's planning?" Ripper cackled, as he tilted his head.

"I don't know." King muttered, as he rubbed his chin in thought. "But as long as he keeps from hurting Jill..."

"Personally, I think he's just using Jill to get rid of his competition, like Callous," Boomer remarked. "After all, besides Whisker, Proxy, and Omega...I'll never trust a robot."

"I wouldn't say that, Boomer." Sage noted, as she folded her arms.

"Why not?" Newt inquired, as he glanced at the raven.

"I may have neglected to tell you guys, but... remember when I said that we found some help for Ani outdoors?" Then, Sage chuckled. "That help... was from Metal Sonic."

Needless to say, the raven got a lot of shocked stares aimed her way.

"...why?" Boomer asked, irritated. "If you can read minds Sage, then you should know; why would Metal do all that?"

"...call me crazy..." Sage began, as she couldn't help but chuckle.

"...but from what I got, he's actually doing this on his own accord. It's like he genuinely wants to help out against Callous."

"Seriously?" the commander uttered in surprise.

Boomer's jaw could only drop at the utter blasphemy.

"Well, let's be perfectly fair on the subject." Wiper began, as he folded his arms. "We're talking about Callous, here. I'm sure that even a tyrant like Metal Sonic would do what he could to bring her down."

"But... that doesn't mean that he won't just kill Jill when everything's done with." Miser noted.

"Actually, I have my doubts that he wants to do that, too." Sage chuckled.

"So what are you saying? That Metal's somehow gone soft?" Boomer suggested with sarcasm; "Please!"

"I'm not saying that he's gone soft; if he had, then I doubt that Jill would train with him." Sage noted. "But... I checked up on both of them, and both Jill and Metal have a massive amount of respect for each other." Then, she chuckled. "I would even go so far as to say that Jill's trying to befriend him."

"...well, that's certainly something you don't hear every day." Queen mused.

"…that certainly sounds like something Jill would do," Boomer murmured. "But I'm still surprised that happened…I mean, isn't Jill aware that after it's over, they'll be against each other again?"

"I think she is." Sage nodded. "And she's still sticking with Metal..." Then, she fell silent.

"...Sage?" King uttered, as he tilted his head.

"...Jill also feels that... Metal Sonic can be a lot more than just a murderous villain." Sage eventually continued, as she closed her eyes. "And she wants to help him realize that..."

"…does she seriously feel that way?" Boomer asked.

Yep." Sage nodded.

"Hrm... that Jill is certainly a strange character..." King hummed.

"But her undying kindness is quite admirable, I must admit."

"Captain?" Boomer was certainly surprised when Charmy walked into the room, with hands behind his back and a sad smile on his face.

"I remember when I first met her," he said. "I thought it was so funny how polite and quick to apologize she was, but it amazes me even more that even with all the hard times she went through, she remained so soft-hearted."

"...she certainly has that talent." Wiper nodded.

Newt glanced at Charmy with a worried look. "Um... you feeling better, Captain?" he asked hesitantly.

"It's hard to tell," Charmy replied with honesty. "Things were brought up from a disturbing past that I wished not to think about…but instead of bringing the pain, it somewhat eased it. A case that I had been trying to solve all my life was finally concluded…and even if it was hard for me to think about, I can rest easy knowing that Vector and Espio's efforts to solve it weren't in vain."

"…and to think that Jill had been the clue to all the answers…" he murmured to himself. "….it's just such a funny turn of fate."

"I suppose it is..." Sage nodded, as she closed her eyes. "Jill really is one of the more interesting people I've met in recent years..."

"Well," Charmy said, joining his hands. "It's been another long day full of events. I think I'm going to go to bed."

"Yeah, it's getting late." King nodded, as he let out a yawn. "Later, guys." he said, as he began walking away.

Boomer watched as Charmy and King walked away, and eventually

decided she'd do the same. "Well, good night guys," she said, turning to the hallway that would lead to her own room.

"Yeah, g'night." Newt said, as he walked away as well.

"...three days left..." Sage mused. "It ought to be interesting..."

"What're you talking about, Sage?" Wiper inquired.

"Oh, nothing..." Sage chuckled. "Let's just call it a day."

Bloom had Johnny by the arms in flight, while Gloom had Callous, and the four of them were flying above the sea of clouds under the midnight full moon at this time. It was amazing that little butterflies could carry them so far, but here they were.

Soon, they encountered the storm that was Angel Island, pulsing again with green lightning and dark storm clouds. The moon's light brought the storm out all the more, revealing just how large it was.

"There it is," Callous said, with a smile curling up.

"Not too shabby." Johnny admitted, as he hummed. "So, how are we getting in, without being torn to shreds by the storm?"

"…hm?" Callous observed something about the storm that was very strange…

…there seemed to be a hole in the storm, leading inside without threatening any harm to those who thought about entering.

To this, her eyes grew suspicious. "Someone's already here…" she muttered.

"...how about we go pay this someone a visit?" Johnny proposed, as he glanced at Callous.

"Maybe we should," Callous said. "Bloom, Gloom, take us in through there."

"Right!" They both shouted, picking up speed. They dove right through the hole, and even if it spared them from the worst of the

storm, some of the showers and the blistering winds still hit them, challenging the butterflies as they flew through.

They still made it to the other side though, landing on a grassy field near the pushed over palm trees that the winds tortured. The funniest thing of all was that where they were on the island was considered the calmest, since the opening had diminished some of the storm.

Callous looked around, aiming to find this someone that had beaten them here.

"...never thought that I'd end up in this place." Johnny said with a chuckle, as he looked around. "No trace of anyone else here, though..."

"Look!" Bloom and Gloom had wandered away a little and when Callous and Johnny found them, they were kneeling beside something.

The ground was dug up, or more like it had been blown up. Inside the small, clean crater that the butterflies knelt by, there was a certain Egg capsule that had been split in half, and broken shards of black jewel were lying in the open contents.

Callous grinned. "Oh yeah…he's free alright."

"Heh... I read about things like this one." Johnny chuckled, as he picked up the capsule's halves. "No button, though... Metal Sonic must've been desperate to keep him locked away, huh?"

"Pretty desperate from the looks of it," Callous said.

Something snatched up her attention when a white figure suddenly pushed her over to pass by her. Callous hit the ground, but she managed to look up to see what it was.

It was something similar to what Jill could transform into; a white being, but with solid, white feathered wings. Some of the feathers had been plucked out though, and blood trickled out of the places the feathers used to be. This white being was in very, *very* bad shape. Not only that, but this being actually bothered to glance back

at Callous, and her identity was revealed.

It was Goddess.

Once she observed the blank expression that Callous had when she stared right back, Goddess could only tell that somehow, Callous was no longer afraid of her. In the condition that she was, she wouldn't be able to defend herself against the witch that had been made with half her daughter's soul, so she turned away and charged for the opening in the storm, out to the glow of the full moon.

When Callous rose to her feet, the opening shrank instantly, and soon the storm had taken over, basking the island in total darkness.

"Well, that was interesting…" Callous murmured.

"...yeah, but now we're kinda stuck." Johnny said, before he sighed. "Hopefully, your dad knows where the emergency exit on this island is."

Callous heard footsteps behind her. A strong feeling crawled up her spine, and she knew immediately who it could be.

"…Hello Daddy," she said, without looking behind her.

Bloom, Gloom, and Johnny did though, and they saw someone standing there. Due to the storm, they had been forced to wear some sort of black cloak that shielded them from the downpour of the storm. This individual felt inclined to pull the hood off though, and it showed them to be a Mobian bat with long silvery white hair wrapped in a long ponytail, which whipped out in the wind currents. This bat stared at them with sharp, but lifeless, pale eyes.

"Callous," he spoke, with his deep, masculine, raspy voice. "What a surprise. I had a hard time imagining that you would be here on the night of my release."

"Daddy!" both the butterfly twins exclaimed, rushing to him until they got a sharp look from him. Then they cowered in fear.

He said nothing to them, and looked to Johnny with an expressionless face. "…and who might you be?" he asked.

Johnny cracked a slight smirk at the sight of the bat. Even though he didn't show it, the mere presence of this character intimidated even him. "...the name's Johnathan Leoniel." he said with a nod to the bat. "Just call me Johnny, though."

He looked Johnny over, and could sense the dark energies within him that had been a product of Callous' doing. "Hm…" he murmured dryly, while in reality he thought how impressive it was that this character had not gone insane with the Corruption flowing in his veins. Still, he did not express it in anyway distinguishable.

"…perhaps Callous has already told you who I am, but I am Deity Novagod," he said, "and you have my permission to address me by my first name, Johnny."

"Better than 'Master,'" Callous remarked. It was pretty obvious that Callous was the only one who wasn't afraid of Deity, and that could be understood.

"...well, thanks." Johnny noted. "It's an honor to meet you, Deity." he said with a brief bow, mostly out of politeness.

And this character had manners. Cute.

Deity's apathy didn't keep him from returning the bow though, and he turned away with a swish of his cloak. "Come," he said. "Let us venture into more comfortable conditions; out of this storm." Bloom and Gloom followed immediately.

As Deity walked away, Johnny let out a mental sigh of relief. *Damn... he's more frightening than death...* he thought, before glancing at Callous. "You coming?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," Callous said. Really, she had been curious why Goddess was here. She could figure out as much as that possibly she sensed Deity's release and came to investigate. After that, it left Callous curious.

Callous and Johnny went to follow Deity, and the bat eventually led them to an underground tunnel that had been dug out; not by Deity, but likely by a certain echidna long ago.

"Th-there aren't any s-s-spiders here…are there?" Gloom asked, and one glanced from Deity made her silent.

"No," he answered anyway.

Johnny was silent, as he glanced at the tunnel's opening. "Where does this lead?" he asked, as he glanced at Deity.

"This leads to a tomb," replied Deity bluntly. "Likely of the extinct echidna race that once thrived on this island."

"How inviting." Johnny noted dryly. "Well, shall we?"

"Yes," Deity responded, walking inside. When Bloom and Gloom entered inside, they shook themselves like wet dogs to dry up a tad, while Callous just left her wet hair alone.

Johnny, too, left his hair wet, as he glanced at the walls whilst they traversed through the tunnel.

They stopped at a small chamber, where stone slabs where set up against the walls. Each of them bore names, all of them unrecognizable. These must have been the tombstones of each echidna buried here.

"Even if it may seem restless here," Deity said, taking off his cloak. "There is no disturbance." Taking off his cloak, they saw his old-fashioned waistcoat and neck ruffle. Basically, his garb loosely based on a Gothic, Victorian style.

"You know, you aught to get a new look," Callous suggested.

Deity made no comment to that.

While Johnny also wanted to make some form of comment about how Deity's wardrobe was outdated, he decided to stay quiet.

"So, Daddy," Callous began. "You know a way off this island?"

"The energies of the Master Emerald conducted a barrier that holds me in this place."

"…what?" Callous didn't expect to hear that, and Deity gave her a cold stare.

"That storm is hiding a secret magical barrier that has knocked me backwards each time I tried to penetrate it," he explained. "No matter how I tried, I could not leave this place."

"...so you're stuck here." Johnny noted, as he scratched his neck. "Which means... we're stuck here, too."

"What about the Master Emerald?" Callous asked.

"I haven't the chance to even come close to it," Deity answered. "The energies that it is giving off are hazardous, and while I may not be affected as much as others may be, I do not yet see a way for me to influence it."

"...damn!" Callous spat bitterly, leaning against the wall.

"Well, isn't this just great." Johnny sighed, as he glanced at Callous. "Guess the match is a bust now, huh?"

"Your duel with Jillian will not be passed up however," Deity threw in, catching Callous' attention.

"What do you mean?" Callous asked.

"You had been allowed to enter here by a pierce through the storm, correct?" Deity said. "That gateway was broken through thanks to her mother. If she can come and go as she pleases, then so may Jillian."

"Wait a minute, how did you know Callous was going to fight Jill?" Bloom asked, promptly flinching just as Deity so much glanced at her.

"I am aware of many things..." Deity answered. "At times it is best not to question them."

"So, you're saying have Jill come here?" Callous supposed. "Are you saying we should have the match on Angel Island?"

"Yes," Deity said.

"That's... fitting, I suppose." Johnny noted, as he scratched the back of his head. "But how are we supposed to let her know that the fight is gonna take place here?" Then, he looked at Callous again. "And what about Metal Sonic?"

"Oh, I bet I could plant the thought into that mechanical mind of his, and I don't doubt that he won't tell her," Callous chuckled, bringing out the Chibi Metal figurine to toss up and down. "And he made the condition that he would observe the fight, so I think he'll still be able to come anyway."

Deity eyed the figurine she tossed. "I see you still manipulate others. You haven't changed."

"Neither have you," Callous said, catching the figurine one last time.

"...so until then, what do we do?" Johnny inquired, as he glanced at Deity. "Do we just hang around and wait for Jill and Metal to pop up here?"

"God, I hope not!" growled Callous.

"Unfortunately it is the case," Deity said. "Unless her mother is kind enough to visit again, I don't believe you will be able to leave."

"Why was she here anyway?" Callous asked, throwing him an annoyed eye.

"Personal matters that were of no real importance," Deity replied, overlooking some of the tombstones. "It just turned violent and she left; perhaps because I was growing brutal."

"Hm..." Johnny nodded, as he glanced at some of the tombstones as well. "Man... three days... what to do while on this island..." he muttered.

"That is up to you to figure out," Deity said. "In the meantime, I will go terrorize Jillian in her sleep."

"She's not afraid of you anymore, you know," Callous mentioned.

"She conquered her fear this morning."

"Then I will resort to a more *real* approach," Deity replied; his tone heavy with apathy. Sitting down criss-crossed, he closed his eyes. A demonic air settled in around him, and darkness oozed out of his body. Eventually, the darkness emitting from him wrapped around him like a cocoon of darkness, rendering him hidden to the eye.

"...huh." Johnny uttered, as he glanced at Callous. "I take it only he knows how to do... that?"

Callous folded her arms. "No, he knows much more than that. He just isn't reckless with his power is all..."

"Hm." Johnny nodded, as he folded his arms as well. "...a more real approach? What do you suppose he means by that?"

"Hell if I know," Callous murmured. "He's too much of a recluse sometimes to bother explaining, and even then, I don't know what he's talking about."

"Huh..." Johnny sighed, as he leant against a wall. "...but man, he gives off a killer aura. A lot more frightening than what the doll pulled... and he hasn't done anything but cover himself in darkness."

Callous chuckled hearing that, and smirked at Johnny. "What's the matter? You're not scared of him, are you?" she teased.

"I'm not scared of him." Johnny said, as he closed his eyes. "But just by being next to him... it feels unlike anything I've ever felt." Then, he scoffed. "I don't like that feeling."

"He tends to do that to everyone around him," Callous said, shrugging. "You might be like me where you get used to it, or it could bug you to death."

"Hm... well, I suppose I should start getting used to it." Johnny said, as he cracked his neck. "After all, we'll be stuck here with him for the next three days..."

Callous sauntered past Johnny, flashing him a sly smile and a playful giggle. "Want to explore the tomb?" she asked as she walked

away.

"...sure, why not?" Johnny nodded, as he followed Callous.

Bloom and Gloom exchanged a look. "What do you want to do?" Bloom asked.

Gloom eventually shrugged.

"Jillian..."

The voice resonated in my very mind, and the presence was all the more disturbing. I was in my dreams, and somehow was well aware of it, but they weren't pleasant. I looked around to find him ...

"Jillian...there's no longer a way to hide from me..."

"You've got it wrong, Deity," I spoke out. "I'm not going to hide from you anymore. I'm going to stand and fight!"

"Still as naive as ever..."

Something snatched me by the throat. I tried to find the hold that was choking me, but there was nothing. I trembled as I began to loose air from my lungs, and nearly panicked when I couldn't refill them.

Jill became so frightened that she woke up, but the dream somehow followed her out of her sleep because she still couldn't breathe. For a minute she was scared, and then she discovered in shock why she couldn't breathe.

She was being choked, but it was by *her own hands!*

She let out a terrified scream and suddenly pried her own hands away, sitting up from where she had been sleeping as she coughed and hyperventilated.

"...Jill." she'd hear Metal Sonic say, as he stood by the mouth of the

cave. *"What's wrong?"*

Jill wrapped her arms around herself insecurely as she continued to tremble. "I couldn't breathe," she said. "In my dream I was suffocating, and when I woke up I was still choking. My own hands were trying to kill me..."

"...that is bizarre." Metal noted, as he walked towards Jill, before sitting down next to her. *"Do you want me to seal your arms against the wall with some liquid metal before you return to sleep?"*

"...sure," Jill replied.

"Alright, then..." Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. *"...but you might not be too sleepy, after an experience like that. Maybe a stroll around the area would make you feel better?"*

"...okay," Jill agreed, standing up.

"Good." Metal nodded, as he stood up too, before beginning to walk out of the cave. *"Come along, now."*

Jill followed, smothering her tired face in her hands while stepping out of the cave. It was still night, but with the moon so low toward the horizon it probably wouldn't be night for much longer.

"...so, how are we feeling?" Metal asked, without looking at Jill. *"If there's anything troubling you, you should impart it on others. Letting it bottle up wouldn't be logical."*

Jill looked at the markings on her hands. The gears in her mind turned for a moment, before she answered Metal. "I think Deity controlled my hands to choke me like that...and it's because of these markings." Her eyes averted to the size through the dark wilderness. "...I don't know; it's just a hunch."

"...a disturbing hunch, but given what has happened recently, I'm not really surprised." Metal muttered, as he glanced at his own hands. *"...I'd hate for him to start doing something like that with me, though..."*

"...he hasn't done anything to me so far when I'm awake," Jill said. "I

think he can only do it if I'm asleep..." she glanced at Metal. "Since you don't really sleep, maybe he won't be able to do it to you."

"I suppose you're right..." Metal nodded, as he looked away from his hands, before stopping. *"...but we shouldn't worry too much. Even if Deity's freed, I doubt that he can escape Angel Island . He'll be a sitting duck , until we've taken out his cronies."*

"Yeah...with that big storm around Angel Island, I'd imagine that even he couldn't escape," Jill murmured.

"Which means that we can focus on taking out Callous, Johnny and those twins, without worrying about Novagod." Then, he turned around to look at Jill. *"...I'd prefer it if you never, ever mentioned this to anyone... but I have to admit, this isn't half-bad."*

"Really?" Jill was a little surprised that Metal said that.

"I admit, I went into this training session with the intent of simply making you stronger, so I could get Callous out of my system." Metal began, as he closed his eyes. *"But I have to say, that if anything like this would ever happen again... I wouldn't mind training you again."*

"Wow...even though all the crap Callous puts you through?" Jill asked; it was a bit of a funny question, but it was asked with honesty too.

"Somehow..." Metal muttered, as he shrugged. *"...Callous making a mess out of my existence seems fairly inconsequential."* Then, he sighed, before chuckling. *"I guess you've really rubbed off on me, huh...?"*

Jill chuckled a little as well. "I guess so."

"Aah..." Letting out another sigh, Metal looked up at the sky. *"...the only thing that could have made this any sillier was if a certain hedgehog began laughing because of me acting this way. But, I suppose you can't have everything..."*

"...somehow you seem so much more at peace," Jill remarked.

"...I do, don't I?" Metal reacted, as he chuckled. " *...wonder why that is..."*

Jill wondered if it had to do with 'rubbing off on him,' but to be honest, she didn't really know how Metal's thought process worked. "Who knows," she answered.

"Well, that's a riddle for another time." Metal shrugged, as he folded his arms. Then, he closed his eyes. *"...what you said... about me having a better purpose..."* he muttered, as he glanced at Jill. *"...have you thought more about that?"*

"...I haven't had a chance," Jill said. "I focused on training as much as I could...but I still want to help you figure it out."

"Hm..." Metal nodded, before he glanced away. *"...maybe after this whole conflict settles down..."*

Jill smiled a little.

Metal noticed her smile, and tilted his head. *"What is it?"* he inquired.

Jill shook her head. "It's nothing," she said.

"...hm." Nodding, Metal looked up at the sky again. *"...it'll be morning soon...* " he muttered.

"...maybe I should go back to sleep before morning comes," Jill murmured.

"...yeah. You'll need rest." Metal nodded, as he glanced at his own hand. *"...if you've changed your mind about me sealing your arms up while you sleep, just say it."*

"I want to play it safe," Jill said. "So you can seal up my arms." She turned to walk back to the cave then, but slowly so Metal could follow.

As Metal followed her, he couldn't help but close his eyes. *...huh. For some reason... I don't feel like corrupting my* voice module *after saying all that* . he thought, before he glanced back at Jill. *...guess she really did rub off on me.*

When they got back to the cave, Jill faced Metal and held out her arms. "Go ahead," she said.

Nodding, a pair of tendrils shot out of Metal's arms, as they wrapped around Jill's arms and hands, forcing her into a sitting position against the wall, before merging with it, properly locking her in place. *"Sorry for being a bit rough."* Metal said.

"That's alright," Jill said.

"...well, I'll stay right here, if you need me." Metal said, as he walked to the opposite wall, before sitting down against it. *"Sleep well."*

With a nod to Metal, Jill closed her eyes. Soon enough, her head kept bobbing drowsily and it eventually fell, making her sound asleep.

"...hm." With a mild scoff, Metal folded his arms, before closing his own eyes. *...pull all the tricks you can, Callous and Novagod. In the end, they won't matter.* he thought. *For the day of your defeat approaches...*

In the Clubhouse, Jack was sitting in his room by himself, playing a calm tone on his harmonica. *...Brick's been gone for a while, now...* he thought, as he closed his eyes. And Tails Doll hasn't come back, either... where are they?

Jack could then hear the elevator doors make a ding down the hallway, since his room was the closest to the elevator, and the doors opening up.

Hearing that, Jack stopped playing his instrument, as he glanced towards the door. "That's gotta be them!" he said, as he ran towards the door, opening it and running out in the hall. "There you are! I was-" he began, but he stopped when he saw who stepped out of

the elevator doors.

"Move over!" complained Brick, squeezing out simultaneously with Cal.

Once they popped out, Cal pushed Brick over. "Maybe you shouldn't have tried to get out at the same time!"

"Maybe if you weren't so stuck-up, I would've let you in first!" Brick argued.

"...Cal!" Quickly, Jack switched on the microphone on his harmonica, glaring at the monkey. "You've got some nerve to show up-"

"Jack, wait!" At that point, Tails Doll fluttered out after Brick and Cal, getting between them and Jack. *"Listen, Uncle Cal has to stay here because Big Bro didn't want Callous to do mean things to Uncle Cal so Uncle Cal has to stay so don't attack him please?"*

The way Tails Doll had spoken with just about no punctuation baffled Jack, as he simply stood where he was. "...eh?"

"Yeah, that was my reaction too," Brick told Jack. "Believe it or not Jack, Cal's going to stay here, according to orders from Metal."

Cal just walked past him and Jack, disappearing down the hall while grumbling to himself in rant. "Brilliant idea Metal...you've really outdone yourself..."

"...okay, I'm kind of confused." Jack muttered, as he placed the harmonica in his pocket, before looking at Brick. "Why are you guys so late?"

"We were attacked by Callous, Johnny and those butterflies!" Tails Doll said, as he began fluttering about around Jack. *"I held them off, but Callous somehow got through my special move, so we bolted it out of there!"*

"Callous has gotten pretty scary Jack," Brick added. "And for some reason she's after Cal, so Metal had him stay here to be kept an eye on."

"...okay..." Jack nodded, as he folded his arms. "Man, Metal's acting really nicely... somehow..."

"Big Bro's just looking out for us!" Tails Doll said, as he landed on Brick's head. *"He doesn't want that mean Callous making things bad."*

"...wait a minute..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Brick. "The others... they don't know that Cal's gonna stay, do they?"

The silence that ensued was so immense, that you could hear a pin drop. And then...

"WHAT IN DAVY JONES LOCKER'S NAME BE YE DOING HERE, YE MANGY CYBER-SIMIAN?" the all-too familiar voice of Captain Whisker bellowed.

"Oh Geez!" Brick uttered, wincing at that yell while he rushed down the hall.

Making it to the room where Whisker and Cal were, Cal had been dodging projectiles that the pirate robot was throwing at him. "Whisker, hold on!" he called, but the pirate wasn't listening.

"I`LL GET YE AFT FER WHAT YE DID T' BOOMER, YE WRETCHED BUCKET O' SCRAP METAL!" Whisker roared, as he relentlessly tried to bring down Cal.

"Oh man..." Tails Doll uttered, as he watched the pirate attack Cal like that.

Brick had forgotten all about what he had done to Boomer, and while that would add to his grudge against Cal, he smacked himself for what he was about to do.

"Whisker, wait!" Brick yelled, standing between him and Cal. "You need to-!" Unfortunately, he was cut off as the kitchen sink was thrown at his face, knocking him over.

"...ouch," Cal commented.

"AGH! BRICK!" Whisker uttered in shock at seeing Brick take a hit

like that, as he rushed to the bull, pulling him to his feet. "I be sorry... but what be ye doin', standin' in front of him? He`s a bad guy!"

"Whisker, listen!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered in front of the pirate. *"Callous wanted to do something with Cal, so Big Bro said that he had to stay here until things get better!"*

"...wait, be ye serious?" Whisker uttered.

"Alright, what's going on, here?" At that point, Natal entered the scene, though she was wearing her pyjamas, which made her looking at the group with a really annoyed scowl seem... off-putting. "Can't a girl get some beauty sleep around here?"

Brick sat up, holding his now bloody nose. It was at that point that he realized his nose ring was gone too, and he saw it just a few feet away from the kitchen sink that had probably had come close to giving him a concussion, yet somehow he was graced with only a bloody nose.

Unless his brain was bleeding and it was leaking through his nostrils, he was grateful.

Cal flinched when Natal walked in. "...when did she start talking more?" he asked in amazement.

"None of your business." Natal scoffed, as she glanced at Cal. "So? What're you doing here?"

"Somehow, I feel like we're going to have to explain that a lot before we're done for the day..." Tails Doll sighed, as he fluttered towards the ring, before grabbing it and fluttering towards Brick.

"...th-thanks," Brick uttered, taking the ring from Tails Doll. He was in so much pain right now it mind as well have been more painful when he spoke. He managed to stand up though, and he shot a glower at Cal, a look that seemed to say 'this is all your fault.'

Looking between Brick and Natal, Cal sighed. "It's Metal's orders that I stay here..."

"...really." Natal muttered, before she sighed. "Brick, you and Tails

Doll go and get yourself fixed up. Whisker, you can go and tell the others that we'll be having a guest here." Then, she glanced at Cal. "In the meantime, we two are going to clean up the mess."

Brick headed for the nearest bathroom, just to see how bad it was. After he took a look in the bathroom mirror, the group could hear Brick scream, "OH DEAR GOD! IT'S AWFUL!"

"...just go and help him, already, Tails Doll." Natal groaned.

"...right." Tails Doll nodded, as he fluttered into the same bathroom. And then... *"OH GOD, IT'S EVERYWHERE!"*

"...man, 'tis got t' be really messed up." Whisker noted, as he began walking down the hall. "I`ll go tell th' kids."

"And in the meantime..." Natal uttered, as she grabbed hold of the sink, before glancing at Cal. "We're gonna clean up."

"Fine," groaned Cal, as he went to pick up the other things Whisker decided to throw at him.

With a grunt, Natal got the sink off the ground, before beginning to move it towards where Whisker had ripped it out. "So, Metal told you to stay here, huh?" she inquired, to start some conversation. "Why so?"

"Somehow Callous was interested in me," Cal grumbled. "He sent me here for my safety so that she couldn't get me..."

"Her, huh..." Natal muttered, as she placed the sink back in place, before wiping her brow. "Why do you suppose she wanted you?" she asked, as she began walking towards the monkey.

"To use me," Cal answered. "And you don't want to know the rest..." he shuddered when he recalled the..."things" she did. He wished Metal had erased that from his memory banks.

"Don't I?" Natal uttered with a raised eyebrow, as she stopped in front of Cal, folding her arms. "I'm an agent of GUN, you know; I can handle just about anything."

"...I don't want to talk about it," Cal said, turning away as he picked up a lamp that had been knocked over.

"Alright, then." Natal shrugged, as she observed Cal. "...Metal did that, right?" she asked. "Your body, I mean."

"Yeah," Cal still didn't look at Natal as he continued to clean.

"Hm." Natal hummed, as she glanced at each of the halls, to ensure that no one else was there. "...mind if I try something?" she asked, as she walked closer to Cal.

"Try what?" He asked, turning to her.

"This." Quicker than Cal could register, Natal suddenly planted a quick kiss on his lips, breaking away before the monkey could react.

Cal jumped. "...what was that for?" he asked, turning a little red.

Natal chuckled. "Just wanted to see your reaction." she said, before giving him a wink. "And you didn't disappoint."

Cal said nothing, turning away to hide how red he was getting. He spotted the broom and grabbed it to sweep the floor.

Natal couldn't help but giggle at this sight, before she began picking up various objects Whisker had thrown around.

Chapter 55

*****ONCE AGAIN, SOME CONTENT AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER**

...*Sigh* **blame Callous...*****

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

"...is that really true?" Striker asked Whisker, once he woke up.

"Aye, I guess so..." Whisker nodded, as he folded his arms. "So we`re goin' t' be havin' t'... spend time wi' Cal, until Jill an' Metal Sonic can take care o' Callous."

Striker pet the sleeping Buddy on his lap. "I wonder what Rudy's going to think of that..." he said.

"Aye, that`s gonna be kinda awkward..." Whisker muttered, as he let out a sigh.

Striker got up without disturbing Buddy, and when he opened the door, he saw Brick walk by; his nose heavily bandaged. "What happened to you Brick?" Striker asked him.

"Nothing," Brick mumbled, with a very nasal voice.

"Yeah... nothing..." At that point, Tails Doll fluttered by as well, stopping to glance at Striker.

"...if ye say so..." Whisker uttered, as he blinked.

"...oh, yeah, where's Proxy *?"* Tails Doll asked, as he tilted his head.

"Th' roof, I think." Whisker said, as he glanced upwards.

"Should we tell him, Captain Whisker?" Striker asked.

"...maybe we ortin' ta." Whisker nodded. "'t`d be a problem if another fight broke ou'..."

"There was a fight?" Whisker never mentioned his episode with Cal to Striker, which caused the bear to look inquiringly at him.

Whisker froze. "...um..." he uttered, before he suddenly went out into the hall. "Let`s go tell Proxy!" he said, as he walked down the hall.

"...Whisker's kinda funny." Tails Doll said, as he couldn't help but hold in a snicker.

"Yeah he is," Striker agreed, as he headed for Milo's room.

Meanwhile, Brick entered the room where Cal and Natal where, seeing that Cal was still sweeping...and red in the face for some reason.

"...how's the cleaning?" he asked, deciding not to ask about what was up with Cal.

"It's going good." Natal said, as she placed a lot of broken objects in a trash bag. "We'll be done soon." Then, she glanced at Brick. "How's the nose?"

"Hurts like hell," Brick said. "But it's taken care of at least."

"Thats good." Natal chuckled, as she tied a knot on the trash bag, to ensure that no trash would be spilt. "With any luck, it should be all better before the kids wake up."

"Somehow I have my doubts..." murmured Brick. Then he looked at Cal, who was STILL sweeping. "Hey, I think the floor's swept enough."

"Huh?" Cal snapped out of his embarrassed trace and glanced at Brick.

Brick shook his head while walking away. "Dork..." he said under his breath.

Natal could only giggle at that.

Cal set the broom aside and yanked up the trash bag in the bin. "I'll take care of that," he said.

"You go ahead and do that." Natal said with a chuckle, as she patted Cal on the back.

Cal just said nothing again, and turned to take the trash bag away.

"...you still got some red on you." Natal said with a smirk, as she glanced at Cal.

"Not listening," He called back, even though it was true. In fact, Natal saying that turned him as red as a tomato.

Giggling, Natal turned to walk away, waving to Cal. "I'll go catch some shuteye. Try not to make a bigger mess while I'm asleep." she said, before she walked back to her room.

Cal actually paused and glanced back and watched her walk away without her knowing until she was gone into her room. Then he continued down the hall. "...Why is everybody always picking on me?" he murmured.

Milo was shocked to hear the news from Striker, and especially when Jack came in to confirm it. "But why is Callous chasing after Cal?" he asked.

"Because she's very mean." both Jack and Tails Doll said at the same time.

"But thar`s got t' be some other reason." Whisker muttered. "Maybe she wants some o' Metal Sonic`s secrets?"

"Maybe," Striker said. "But that means that Cal might be staying here for awhile..."

"...what about Rudy?" Milo asked. "Have you told him yet?"

"...not yet..." Striker murmured nervously.

"I hope he isn't going to freak out over it..." Jack muttered, as he sighed. "Man, things have gotten busy around here..."

"He's not gonna stay for that long..." Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"Uncle Cal's just gonna stay long enough for Jill and Big Bro*

to take out Callous. Then he'll be safe!"

"I hope Jill and Metal can do it," Milo said. Getting out of his own bed, he walked to the door. "I kinda miss Jill,' he said. "She's like a big sister."

"...they're gonna do it." Jack said, as he glanced at Milo. "Jill and Metal are going to take out Callous... and then she's gonna come home!"

"And Big Bro isn't gonna let anyone else try to take over his job!" Tails Doll said as well.

"...well, we better go tell Rudy," Milo said. "We can't put it off after all..." He jumped when he saw Cal pass by.

"Where do you guys dump your trash anyway?" he asked.

"There's a garbage grinder one floor down," Striker said. "The Professor didn't want us littering in the jungle, so he built it."

"I see," the monkey murmured, continuing through the hall toward the elevator.

"...huh." Jack uttered. "Well, let's go find Rudy." he said, as he began walking down the hall.

"...wonder what's on Uncle Cal's mind..." Tails Doll uttered.

The group's biggest worry was Rudy, and when they woke him up, telling him the news, he just sat there for a moment.

"...Rudy?" Striker said.

"...Cal's here in the Clubhouse?" the kangaroo muttered, "and he's...going to stay here?"

They nodded.

Rudy was silent again, and this was unusual for a hyperactive kangaroo like him. He was trying to think about what happened. More than a week ago, Cal used to be a good guy, but then he

turned bad; trying to hurt everyone. He hurt Boomer...and even if she had a short temper, she was good to him.

"...he's not going to stay that long, though..." Tails Doll began, as he tilted his head.

"...you okay, Rudy?" Jack asked, as he looked at the kangaroo.

"...I don't know guys..." Rudy said. "I mean...Cal hurt Boomer really badly..."

"...we know," Milo said. "But I get the feeling that Metal won't let Cal do anything like that to us..."

"If he couldn't..." Jack began. "...well, I don't think he'd order Cal to stay here."

Rudy thought about it some more, burying himself under the covers. "Well, thanks for telling me," he said. "But I'm not ready to go see him...so I'm going to go back to sleep..."

"...that's fine," Striker said.

"Sweet dreams, then..." Tails Doll said.

At that point, Jack let out a yawn. "Maybe we should go back to sleep, too..." he mumbled.

"That sounds good right now," Milo said.

"Captain Whisker, you told Proxy right?" Striker asked, just to make sure.

"Nay yet, but I`ll do 't when ye guys be sleepin', alright?" Whisker said.

"As long as he knows..." Jack yawned, before he stood up. "I'm going to my room..."

"Me too..." Striker said, walking out of the room.

"Me three..." added Milo, following him.

"... good night ..." Tails Doll said, as they all eventually left Rudy's room. After that, only Tails Doll and Whisker remained in the hall, as the kids had gone to bed. *"...wonder what Uncle Cal's doing."*

"Who knows." Whisker shrugged, as he began walking down the hall. "I`ll go tell Proxy, now."

"You do that, Whisker." Tails Doll nodded.

Cal had returned from the 'garbage grinder' from a floor below, thinking how interesting the machine was. It literally crushed the garbage like a hydraulic press, but to bits so tiny it was hardly noticeable. Then the bits were transformed into a type of fertilizer material that was dumped outside; meant for the very tree that held up the tree house.

And it sure was standing strong.

Cal cracked open the nearest window he could find and looked out into the night. Somehow, he was starting to feel like his old self again; before being turned into a cyborg. Alone...disliked...

You know, when it comes down to it I'm a total loser... he thought.

"Hiya, Uncle Cal..." he'd hear Tails Doll say, as he fluttered close to the monkey. *"How're you feeling?"* he asked.

"...decent," Cal murmured, without looking back at the plushie.

"Hm..." Tails Doll hummed, as he fluttered onto Cal's head. *"...how do you think Big Bro is doing right now?"*

"Who knows," Cal shrugged his shoulders.

"Hm." Tails Doll nodded. *"...is there anything on your mind, Uncle Cal?"* the doll inquired.

"Wondering how I ended up here in the first place..." Cal mumbled. "In a matter of simply two weeks, I went from working for a detective agency to being hunted down by a witch...and being hated by practically everyone because of some things I did."

"...what did you do, then?" Tails Doll inquired. *"I don't think Big Bro's told me about that..."*

"I betrayed the Chaotix," Cal said. "Not only that, but I came close to killing someone..." Somehow, he felt more like he wasted his life, and while he could forgive himself if he ever felt guilty, there was no way that anyone else would forgive him for nearly killing Boomer.

"...Uncle Cal?" Tails Doll began, as he fluttered off his head, before looking the monkey in his eyes. *"Be honest. You're not just feeling decent, are you?"*

"...no," Cal admitted. "But I think I know what my problem is..."

"...really?" Tails Doll inquired, as he placed himself on Cal's head again. *"What's that?"*

"I felt like I was wasting my time and my life, but I didn't figure it out until just now," Cal murmured. "I think it's because I'm trying to be something I'm not."

"...and what are you going to do about it?" Tails Doll asked.

"...I don't know what I'm going to do about it," Cal said. "Think about it a lot I guess..." He looked up at Tails Doll. "I tried to be evil most of the time, but it ended up backfiring on me. I think it took this long to finally get that I'm just not the type that can be evil...but I don't know what I am."

He looked outside again. "...I'm still trying to figure it out, I guess..."

"...I can help you to find it out!" Tails Doll said happily. *"Better to do something together than alone!"*

Cal looked at Tails Doll again, in some disbelief. "That's not a bad idea..." he admitted. "...but how would you help me?"

"We'll just have to find out!" Tails Doll laughed. *"But maybe you should get some rest, first. I know Big Bro made you that cyber-like thing to make you not need it, but you should still rest!"*

"...where do you suggest I sleep?" Cal asked. "I'm sure that I'm not welcome to any of the beds here..."

"Well... you could always take a couch!" Tails Doll said. *"I can get you a blanket, if you'd like..."*

"...sure," Cal murmured, "I'd appreciate that Tails Doll." Without letting Tails Doll respond, Cal ventured through the halls until he came into a room with a couch; coincidentally enough, the same room that Whisker had thrown the objects at him.

Soon enough, Tails Doll fluttered after him, now carrying a blanket after him. *"Here you go, Uncle Cal!"* he said, as he handed him the blanket.

"Thanks," He murmured. After grabbing a pillow and lying onto the couch, he whipped the blanket up in the air and allowed it to settle on top of him, getting comfortable on the couch as best he could.

" Good night *, Uncle Cal..."* Tails Doll said, as he began fluttering down the hall.

"...night," he mumbled, closing his eyes. The cybernetic parts of him started to shut down, while his organic self actually began drifting off to sleep.

Tails Doll glanced one more time at Cal after that, before he fluttered off. *...I hope that he'll be alright...*

"Well, the tomb's as boring as it can get..." Callous said.

"And we're stuck here for three days? Lame." Johnny groaned, as he sat down. "Man, what I'd do for a trap door that could take me out of here..."

"You're not the only one," Callous murmured, sitting down next to him.

Letting out a sigh, Johnny glanced at Callous. "Is he always like that? Deity, I mean."

"Like what?" Callous asked, intending for Johnny to be more specific. Deity was a number of things in her book...

"Well... how do I put this..." Johnny began, as he scratched his head. "...well, emotionless, for one thing."

"Believe it or not, yes, he's always been that way," Callous answered. "I think his emotions were all sucked out of him long ago, but I never knew what really caused him to be like that. All I know is that he cant be manipulated at all, because he has no emotions to manipulate with."

"Hm..." Johnny muttered, as he glanced at Callous. "Say... now that he's gone into that dark cocoon-thing... he can't hear us, can he?"

"Nope, he can't," Callous said.

"And... he can't read minds, can he?" Johnny inquired.

"Not that I know of," she said again. "Why?"

"If that's the case..." Johnny muttered, as he glanced at Callous. "...then we could start thinking about how best to... you know, deal with him after Jill's out of the picture."

"I've been thinking about that," Callous whispered back to him. "And I thought of something actually...back in Westopolis, Metal Sonic had a machine that drew out energy from the black emerald Daddy was locked up in...it literally sucked the Corruption out of the emerald and it was used to inject Corruption into these androids that were modeled after Shadow the Hedgehog."

"Really..." Johnny whispered back. "...do you think it'd work on him, too?"

"I think so," Callous whispered again. "I think we could drain the Corruption completely out of him, and while he's left defenseless...we take him out." An evil smile grew on her face. "How does that sound?"

"That sounds great." Johnny whispered back, smirking as well. "But first... we gotta get off this island."

"Well, we still only have three days..." Callous muttered. "...scratch that-two days now. To be perfectly honest though, we don't have to rush..."

"True..." Johnny muttered, as he glanced up at the ceiling. "...man, soon you'll be all done with Jill. How quickly do you think you'll get her to throw the match in your favor?"

"I'm going to toy with her and humor the challenge a bit," Callous said. "Then if things are too slow, I'll force her to forfeit by threatening Metal's welfare. I'm sure I could inflict enough pain on the toaster to make him wish he were dead..."

"Too bad he can't die, huh?" Johnny laughed. "Aah, just thinking about how you'll beat her is too much fun!"

Callous eyed Johnny from head to toe, allowing dirty thoughts to sink into her mind. *Not as much fun as what I could do to you, big boy,* she thought.

Blinking, Johnny glanced at Callous. "...so what's on your mind right now, hm?" he inquired.

Callous giggled playfully as she stood up. "Oh...nothing..." she said, hoping to tease him. She even hoped to tantalize with him with a sway of her hips as she walked by.

Johnny was silent for a brief moment, before letting out a chuckle, as he stood up, before following Callous. "It can't just be nothing, can it?" he pressed on, as he folded his arms.

Callous gave him a smirk over her shoulder. "I don't know...what do you think?"

Grinning, Johnny suddenly wrapped his arms around Callous' shoulders. "Oh, I have a few guesses..." he said with a chuckle.

"Mm-hm," she hummed, smiling a sexy smirk.

"...so, know about a place we're certain that the twins can't get to?" Johnny inquired, as he smirked back. "I wouldn't want anyone to spoil our fun..."

"Sure. Right this way," she whispered, taking him by the hand and leading him away.

As he was led away, Johnny couldn't help but look at Callous. *Man, she's fine...* he thought. *Bliss couldn't hold a candle to this beauty...*

When reaching the designated area, Callous didn't waste any time pinning Johnny against the wall and stopping a lips distance away. "This place aught to do..." she whispered.

"It better..." Johnny whispered back, as he was quick to grab Callous' own arms and overpowering her, pinning her against the wall instead. Wasting no time himself, he made his move by quickly kissing Callous.

Callous let out a chuckle, breaking away, "Ah, it seems it backfired." Then she returned, kissing vehemently with tongue.

Again, Johnny acted far more ferociously than the last time, as he was actually undressing Callous whilst he was consumed with the makeout. Callous was surprisingly overwhelmed this time, but she liked it. She gasped in-between kisses while she assisted with undressing herself. When Callous was fully undressed, Johnny suddenly spun her around, before pinning her to the ground. "I'm gonna enjoy this..." he chuckled, as he returned to kissing her.

After tossing tongues around for a bit, she broke to reply briefly, "I get the feeling that I will too..."

"That makes it better." Johnny quipped, as he quickly dove in again to kiss her.

Chapter 56

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Ani made sure the sun had risen up before she tip-toed out of the basement and through the halls quietly. She didn't know how early it was, which meant it was the perfect opportunity to prank someone. Not yet was she sure of the demise her victim would experience, but it would be good. Ani grinned at the thought of it while she walked to each bedroom, peeking through the door to decide on her first unsuspecting victim.

Wiper? No...

Queen? No...

Miser? No, she was too nice to her...

The GUN Commander? No way was she going to get on the bad side of the military...

Boomer was out of the question for her temper...

Newt? That was an iffy...

Ripper? Aw, HELL no!

When she peeked at King, she stared for quite a bit. King was a good possibility. In fact, her grin grew even wider at the thought. "He's perfect," she snickered under her breath.

King, as it turned out, was fast asleep, drool hanging out from his wide-open mouth, as he was half-way to simply falling out of the bed.

"Let's see...if I know better, I'd think that cats would hate water..." she murmured in thinking. "So..." She whizzed down the hall and got a bucket full of water, but that wasn't all. She spotted syrup sitting on the kitchen counter, and the wheels in her head started turning like

nobody's business. She snatched that syrup, and a pillow, and returned to King's door.

With her telekinesis, she held the bucket of water over King, readying it while she spread syrup on the ground next to his bed, and suspended the pillow close to the ceiling above the puddle of gooey syrup. While keeping a snicker to herself, she also administered syrup to King's hand, and allowed the bucket of water to tip over and sprinkle King. Hopefully, the water on his face will make his hand wipe it off, thus placing the syrup on King's face.

However, in what would come as a disappointment to Ani, King still slept, as if nothing at all was happening to him.

Secretly disappointed indeed, Ani didn't let that stop her. "Well, better dump the whole bucket," she muttered, turning the bucket completely upside-down and a huge slash hitting King.

Surprisingly enough, King was still asleep, not even bothered with the water hitting him.

"...aw c'mon!" complained Ani. Then she glanced at the syrup. "...well if he's not going to wake up..." Ani squeezed the syrup over King instead, intending to cover his whole body in syrup.

And that was still not enough to wake the tiger up, as he even began snoring a lot louder.

"Heheheheh..." Ani snickered again, and holding the pillow over King, she ripped it open. Feathers fluttered down weightlessly over him, and a good portion of them began to stick to him.

And still, King was asleep.

"And what are we up to?" Ani would suddenly hear Wiper say, as he was standing right behind her, his arms folded.

Ani didn't turn. She was marveling at the sight she created; a feather coated King. "Wow, can he really sleep through all that?" she laughed at Wiper.

"He can..." Wiper muttered, as he glanced at King. "...but when he

wakes up..." At that point, the snake smirked. "...there will be no mercy."

"Not for him," Ani chuckled, with evil mingling fingers.

"...I don't think you understand." Wiper muttered, as he leaned against the wall. "One time, when me, King and Miser were on a mission together, King decided to take a nap while I and Miser scouted ahead. When we got back, we saw that King's knife had been stolen; most likely by one of the men from the group we were hunting. And when he woke up..." At that point, Wiper let out a hiss. "...well, let's just say that me and Miser were unneeded in eliminating them."

"...but this isn't stealing a weapon," Ani reasoned. "It's just harmless fun…"

"King doesn't look at it like that." Wiper said, as he glanced at Ani. "For him, being humiliated in his sleep is the equivalent of declaring war against him. And when that happens..." Then, he hissed. "...no one is spared."

Ani looked slowly over to Wiper, and gulped. "...and the damage was already done..."

"...here's some advice." Wiper began, as he glanced at the wall ahead of him. "Lay low. It will take a while, but if no one tells on you... well, you might just be spared. Can't speak for the rest of us, but... hey, he won't catch you, right?"

"...I guess," Ani murmured in unsureness. With one last fearful look, she scurried down the hall back to the basement where Hunter would be asleep.

Glancing at Ani running away, Wiper sighed. Then, he walked into King's room. "She bought it."

"Yes!" At that point, King sat right up in his bed, laughing. "She actually fell for it! Getting splashed, syruped and feathered while pretending to be asleep was TOTALLY worth it!"

"Yeah, but now you're going to need a shower." Wiper noted, as he

folded his arms. "And explain to Boomer or Charmy how this mess got here."

"Eh, details!" King laughed, as he looked at his arms. "Besides, it won't take too long to get this out, right?"

"...yeah, you just tell yourself that." Wiper sighed, as he walked out of the room.

Jill opened her eyes when she awoke, thinking about what happened in her dreams once she went back to sleep last night. Luckily she wasn't choked anymore thanks to Metal's restraints, but it certainly wasn't sweet dreams.

Yet, she had no problem because she used to have nightmares constantly.

It was a meadow. Everything that was once alive was now dead; the skinny trees drained of life and gray, and the flowers were wilted in a black and white grave. A dark red sky loomed overhead which complimented the darkness all around; the mists of darkness swirling around at my feet through the dead flowers.

"It seems you have grown much stronger since our last meeting, Jillian..."

I didn't have to turn around to know that Deity was right behind me. He was hissing right in my ear too.

"I have," I said.

"Hm...I can feel that surge of Purity coursing through you, alright..." he continued to hiss right in my ear. Then I could feel him drift away.

"If only I had known the things you did before terrorizing me, Deity," I spoke. "It just makes you all the more despicable."

"Oh?" He came to my other ear now. "And what "things" would those be?"

"I know you killed *Sonic the Hedgehog ," I replied.*

"Really now?" he murmured. "I would have to suppose that his spirit contacted you somehow from the other world...that must have been how you found that out."

I wasn't surprised that Deity could figure that out. After all, I wouldn't doubt that he could tell what was going on even though he was in that emerald.

"...yes," he hummed in my ear once more. "You also seem not to fear me as much as you once did..."

"Thanks to my friends," I answered.

"...you actually consider that robot as your friend, hm?" Deity hissed.

I knew he must have been talking about Metal. Irritated with his little game of hiding behind me, I turned to look at him; but only to find he wasn't there. "Yes, I consider Metal my friend," I answered anyway.

"But he doesn't think of you so softly..." his voice still carried on through the air, and it left me unknowing where he was.

"...I know," I said, wanting not to be reminded of that.

"Even if you two were to become enemies again, you would still befriend him? That sounds illogical...but it certainly sounds like you."

"There's no way you'd understand; you have no feelings whatsoever," I remarked. "You wouldn't even feel your toe if I stomped on it."

"For good reasons too." A black creature jumped out, and planted its face in front of mine. It opened its jagged jaws and drooled with black ooze, smiling devilishly.

I didn't even flinch.

The creature didn't move its mouth, but his voice came from its open mouth. "But you've gained so much over the time since my disappearance...new friends, young love...you would be willing to give that up to halt Callous in her tracks? Even to halt me?"

"Yes," I said strongly. "I already have."

"...would you even be willing to give up Metal to stop us?" Deity questioned again, which actually made me stop for a minute.

I turned away hesitantly. It was hard enough having to imagine the thought that I would give up Brick, but it couldn't answer right away for Metal. "...I made a promise to him that no matter what, I wouldn't give up the fight," I said. "So yes...I would even give up Metal to stop the two of you.

The creature just stared at me. "What a shame that your demise won't be by my hand..." Deity murmured, while the beast turned and crawled away. "But it sure will be a delightful sight to watch anyhow once you die in battle."

"Who said I was going to die?" I said. "I'm going to win Deity, and once Callous is gone, then you're next."

Jill hoped that she wouldn't have to give up her friends or Brick and while she already promised Metal that she would win, she hoped it wouldn't come to the worst. There sure was a lot of pressure that was pressing down on her right now in order to win that battle.

At that point, she would see that Metal was seemingly asleep, as his eyes were closed while he leaned against the wall opposite of her.

Jill was taken out of her thoughts at that sight, blinking in disbelief. *Is he actually...sleeping?* she thought. *I didn't think robots needed to do that...*

"...good morning, Jill." Metal eventually said, without moving from where he sat. *"The seal worked wonders, I take it."*

"Uh...yeah, it did. Thanks," Jill said, deciding to leave the wonder of sleeping Metal aside.

"You're welcome." Metal shrugged, as the metal around Jill's arms liquified, before returning to Metal's body. *"So, what did we dream about?"* he inquired, as he opened his eyes, looking at Jill.

"Deity spoke to me, mostly to intimidate me," Jill said. "But I wasn't

fazed by it at all. It was a pretty mild nightmare compared to the other ones I've had."

"Good. I suppose it means that you're almost ready to face him." Metal mused, as he stood up. *"Well, shall we get started?"*

"Sure," Jill said to Metal, standing up as well. "You said we would get into hand-to-hand combat, right?"

" *Indeed.* " Metal nodded, as he looked at his hands. " *Before we really get into it, I wish to try something. Punch me as hard as you can, without using Purity to enhance your strength.* "

Jill clenched up a fist, and after a deep breath, she slammed it into Metal as hard as she could.

And it served to do nothing more than produce a small clank, as Metal only looked down at the fist. " *...yeah, I doubt that we have enough time to really up your strength, so you should try relying on enhancing yourself with Purity.* "

Jill had a pained look on her face while she slowly pulled the limp hand away. "Ow…" she whimpered. "That really hurt…"

" *Well, I'm sure it's nothing that you can't fix up.* " Metal said with a shrug, as he walked outside. " *Rather than relying on brute force, we should concentrate on technique.* "

She sent a glow to her injured hand to heal it, and winced every now and then while she followed Metal. "Wow…I broke 10 different bones in my hand by punching you," she said, wide-eyed.

" *...really?* " Metal uttered in surprise. " *Unexpected...* " he muttered, before eventually turning around to face Jill. " *Alright, injuries aside, are you ready?* "

Once the glow was gone from her hand, she moved it around to see if it was healed completely, and smiled when she had no problem moving it around. "Now I am," she said.

" *Alright. Now...* " Metal began, as he took a step forward, clenching his hands into fists. " *Try to avoid getting hit by me, without dodging*

the attack. " Then, he ran right at Jill, preparing to swing his left arm at her.

Jill reacted so quickly even she didn't realize what she was doing. She grabbed the arm Metal threw at her, locked it up with her own arms, and flipped Metal over her head onto the ground.

After that, she stared in amazement.

As he landed on the ground, Metal blinked, as he glanced up at Jill. " *...impressive."* he uttered, before he got to his feet. " *But don't relax just yet. Remember, don't dodge it, but keep it from hitting you.* " At that point, a tendril emerged from Metal's right shoulder, as it shot out at her.

Jill smacked away the tendril with her hand sharply, assuming a balanced stance.

" *...not bad.* " Metal mused with a nod, as four more tendrils emerged from his body. " *Keep at it."* he said, as all five of the tendrils shot out at Jill.

Jill snatched one tendril and quickly wrapped it around the other ones as they came; tying them up in a big knot. Then she pushed them away, all while she still was in a balanced stance.

" *...you're a natural.* " Metal chuckled, as the tendrils retracted back into his body. " *Just where did you learn moves like that?* "

"My village," Jill said. "I hoped to compete in some of the tournaments they held, but they turned me down because while I had great defense, I lacked strength. That…and because I was a girl…" Then she pouted in disapproval. "Girls weren't allowed to fight like boys."

" *Hm.* " Metal nodded, as he folded his arms. " *...I want to try something again. Enter your Holy form, and punch me with all you've got.* "

Jill closed her eyes, concentrating until the cocoon of light came and transformed her into her Holy Form. Then as soon as she opened her eyes, she lurched forward at Metal with a tight fist again. This

time, somehow, she got the feeling that she wasn't going to break any bones this time…not her own bones at least.

...hn? The moment she threw her fist forward, Metal felt an immense surge in power, and when the fist connected, he was launched off the ground, rocketing right into a tree, which shattered upon impact. " *...not... bad...* " Metal managed to cough, as he got on his feet again, albeit woozily.

" *Whoa!"* Jill didn't comprehend the force she would dish out. *"Are you okay?"* she asked.

" *Yeah, don't worry about me...* " Metal groaned, as he held his head. " *...if I had been a human being, I'd estimate about 50 different bones being broken from that kind of blow.* " he chuckled. *A hard hitter, she is...* he thought.

"… *not even archery could improve my strength* that *much…"* Jill uttered.

" *Purity really is a strange thing...* " Metal hummed, as he glanced at his arms. " *...I'd like to try something different.* " Metal said, as he looked up at Jill, before his arms were coated in dark energy. " *If an attack should break through your technique, we'll need to see how much you'll resist it.* "

" *You sure it's a good idea to use Corruption?"* Jill asked worriedly. She couldn't believe that Metal actually copied data he might have gathered from Callous.

" *I have no earthly clue.* " Metal shrugged. " *But since you're going up against Callous, you'll need to be prepared in case she brings out the old fisticuffs.* " Then, he closed his eyes. " *Just tell me if you think it's a bad idea.* "

"… *well, you're right about being prepared,"* Jill murmured, assuming her balanced stance once more. *"…just let me know if you start to experience anything strange when you're using it, okay?"*

" *I will.* " Metal nodded, as he opened his eyes. " *Get ready!* " Then, he rushed right at Jill, aiming a punch directly at Jill's abdomen.

It was too low to block with her hands, so Jill spun around to kick Metal's fist away, and spun again to direct a hard kick to his face. Metal, however, reacted to this by blocking the kick with his right arm, before throwing a punch right at Jill with his left. Jill batted the fist away with her hand again, and then jammed her fist at Metal. This time, Metal kicked the incoming fist away, before he threw yet another punch at Jill.

It hit, and the pain hit pretty harshly to. Clenching her teeth and holding in her breath, Jill whipped up her leg in an uppercut kick, aimed for Metal's chin. Metal took the kick head-on, which caused him to stumble back. However, he quickly glared at Jill, before moving towards her...

...and suddenly stopping. " *...hngh...* " he groaned, as he glanced at his arms.

"… *What is it?"* Jill asked, without letting up her guard.

Without replying, Metal allowed the Corruption around his arms to vanish, before he closed his eyes. " *...I felt something unpleasant after a while. I don't want to take any huge risks...* "

" *What did it feel like?"* Jill asked again.

" *...it felt... disturbing.* " Metal uttered, as he held his head. " *It wasn't painful, but... I felt like I was being pressured into putting more force behind the Corruption.* "

" *It doesn't sound that surprising,"* Jill remarked. *"But that doesn't sound good…maybe you shouldn't use it after all."*

" *Maybe not...* " Metal muttered, as he sat down. " *...but there is one thing that I really wish to try out...* "

" *And what's that?"* Jill was curious.

" *I think it's safe to say that both Purity and Corruption are two radically different powers; each originating from one of the Gaias. However, there's been one thought that has been bugging me, ever since I first heard of Purity and Corruption...* " Then, his right arm began glowing green, whilst his left arm took on a dark glow. "

...namely, what would happen if the two forces were in sync with one another? "

"… *personally, I think they're just too different to be mixed together…"* Jill said. *"…but I don't really know what would happen."*

" *Well... there's only one way to find out.* " Metal said, as he took a deep breath, pressing his palms together to see if there would be some form of reaction between the two forces.

There was a build up between the two forces, and eventually it grew to a dangerous level that it suddenly and inexplicably imploded with an incredible impact. As Metal was blown back by the impact, a surge of pain went through him, as he let out a pained cry, before skidding to a halt by a tree. " *Ugh...* "

" *Metal!"* Jill ran to his side to make sure he was okay.

" *Agh...* " Metal groaned, as he looked at his arms in disbelief. " *...incredible... such a massive surge of power...* " he uttered. " *Quite volatile, though... maybe something is needed to create balance between the two...?* "

" *I don't know,"* Jill said, helping the metallix up onto his feet.

" *...even if it ended up with me taking a heavy blow...* " Metal muttered, as he still looked at his hands. " *...Purity and Corruption... maybe there is a way for them to be properly merged?* "

" *If there was a way to mix them together, I wonder what that would do to people like Callous and Deity…"* Jill wondered.

" *We can find out about that later.* " Metal said, as he glanced at Jill. " *For now... let's get back to training.* "

" *Right,"* and Jill was in her balanced stance again.

Brick yawned while walking down the hall that morning. His nose didn't hurt anymore, but he still replaced the bandage just in case. He probably wasn't going to be wearing the nose ring again anytime soon though. At least he would give it another day to heal, and even if it looked dumb, it felt somewhat refreshing not to have a ring up

his nose.

He jumped severely when he saw Cal asleep on the couch, "What the-?"

Cal was still snoozing away, and he actually looked pretty comfortable on the couch.

"…huh," Brick muttered dryly.

"G'mornin'..." Brick would hear Natal say, as she walked out of her bedroom, still wearing her pajamas, before she yawned. "...how's the nose?" she inquired, as she looked at the bull.

"Its fine now," Brick said. "I figure I'll give it one more day to heal though…" Then he gave Cal a point. "…I didn't think cyborgs needed to sleep…"

"Eh, maybe he figured he needed a time-out." Natal shrugged, as she let out a yawn. "So, what's on the agenda today?"

"Well, after having gotten most of the gears running, I've been thinking to take us into Future City and check out the Extreme Gear courses there," he said. "I hear they're pretty big there."

"…but I'm not sure if we'll get an opportunity to do that; things can pop up," and he directed another glance at Cal, implying the events from last night.

"True..." Natal nodded, as she glanced at Cal as well. "...you know, looking at him like this... he doesn't seem all that bad."

Brick shot her a not amused look. "You're off your rocker."

"No, I'm serious." Natal noted, as she tilted her head. "He might have done some seriously despicable things before... but he really doesn't look like the type who'd want to do things like that."

Brick took a second look at Cal to think about those words, but all that came out was a grunt, "eh, he just looks like a geek to me."

"That's just you." Natal said, as she looked at Cal. "Being an

espionage expert means that you need to be able to know what kind of people you're dealing with, just by observing them. Otherwise, you could end up in a ditch somewhere." she said, before closing her eyes.

"Whatever you say," Brick commented. "But it's not like I'll be trusting him anytime soon..." Then he turned down a hall. "I'll go ahead and make breakfast this time, Natal."

"You do that..." Natal nodded, as she glanced at Cal again, before leaning against a wall. *...wonder when he's gonna wake up... and how he'll react to seeing me...* she thought.

Soon enough, Cal did wake up, but he turned over before he opened his eyes, so he didn't notice Natal standing there. It took a while for his cybernetic parts to reboot, and to pass time, he scratched an itch he had on his chest. *You know, I have to admit that I missed being able to sleep,* he thought.

"...good morning." Natal decided to say once she noticed that Cal woke up.

"WHAA?" Cal was startled so bad that when he jerked to see Natal, he slipped off the couch and fell on the floor. He got back up on his feet though, hurriedly adjusting the glasses that had slipped down his nose. "It's not a good idea to sneak up like that!" he chastised.

"...that's pretty much my job." Natal said, before giggling. "You're really jumpy, you know that?"

"Am not!" Cal argued, although he was even more embarrassed to realize it was true.

"Are too." Natal said in a bit of a playful tone, before giggling. "You should try and work on that... by the way, you got some red on you."

Cal's mouth became crooked when he turned away, hiding his red face from Natal again.

Again, Natal couldn't help but giggle, as she approached Cal. "What now? Did I touch a nerve?" she said in that playful tone again.

"Don't you have something better to do than tease me?" Cal asked, shooting Natal a slight scowl.

"Hmm..." Natal hummed, as she tapped her finger against her glasses. "...well, Brick's off making breakfast, so... nope." she said, before giggling.

"Oi..." he sat back down on the crouch, grumbling. *I forgot...I also didn't like to talk to people before I became I cyborg,* he thought. *I STILL don't...*

"...you're not the talkative type, are you?" Natal inquired, as she folded her arms, looking at Cal.

"Never have been," Cal muttered, thinking how strange it was that what she said aligned closely to his own thoughts.

"Hm... why is that?" Natal inquired, as she tilted her head. "You're not a people person, is that it?"

Cal shrugged subtly.

"Hm... that won't do." Natal eventually said, as she shook her head. "You've got to learn to open up to people."

"Last time I opened up to someone, they stabbed me in the back." Cal turned away shamefully, wondering how that let itself out, but it got him thinking about the case he screwed up on; the case that got him tangled up with Metal Sonic in the first place.

"...ouch." Natal said, as she closed her eyes. "What happened?"

"...she's dead now," Cal muttered. "But it's not exactly something I'd want to think about."

"You know, if you want to be a better people-person, you got to dig up some nasty memories from time to time." Natal said, as she glanced at Cal. "How about I tell you about one of my nasty memories, and then you tell me about what happened with those people?"

"...you'd be willing to tell your enemy this?" Cal asked curiously.

"Right now, sides don't matter." Natal said with a shrug. "Metal Sonic had you sent here because Callous is after you, and the rest of us are waiting for Jill to take her out. For the moment, we aren't enemies." Then, she closed her eyes. "So do you want me to tell you, or not?"

Cal thought about it while looking at Natal. "...okay," he finally answered.

With a nod, Natal removed her glasses, before humming. "Lessee, nasty memories..." she hummed, as she tapped her chin. Then, she snapped her fingers. "First mission I had as a GUN Agent. At that time, I wasn't part of Team Alpha; I was just a grunt. My squad was sent to Casinopolis to shut down a drug cartel that had been reported in the area."

Cal became interested suddenly. "Hey, I heard something about that, but I never really found out how it ended...what happened?"

Natal became silent, as she sighed. "...we were ambushed. For a drug cartel, their men were heavily armed. The rest of the squad was annihilated... and I was taken hostage."

Cal's eyes widened while he waited to hear what happened next.

"...I was their slave for a whole two weeks..." Natal uttered, as she took a deep breath. "...I was forced at gunpoint to do just about anything they told me to do... if I didn't do as good as they expected, they'd beat me senseless..."

"...geez..." he croaked. Imagine the things Callous would've done to him, but instead they were done to her. That certainly made him more open-minded.

"Yeah, I know..." Natal nodded. "...thankfully, I was eventually saved by Wiper and Newt, and the drug cartel was completely wiped off the face of the earth that day. After I recovered from the trauma, I joined with Wiper and Newt in Team Alpha."

"...how could you get over an experience like that?" Cal wondered.

"Believe me, it took at least a month, if I recall correctly." Natal

muttered, as she rubbed her temples. "Almost everyone thought that there really was no chance for me... even I thought that I should just throw in the towel after that..."

Then, she smiled. "But Wiper told me something, that spurred me to move on. He said, 'We didn't save you so you could just give up. You have to focus on what happens and what will happen around you, and not on what has happened.'" After saying that, she closed her eyes. "And they weren't scornful words... but words from a friend."

Cal looked down at the ground after hearing that, thinking about what she said. He left it quiet in the room until he was convinced to speak his story, "Awhile back when I still worked for the Chaotix, we were hired to investigate a case that involved a mob, or mafia of sorts. There had been a shooting that erupted in the city streets of Westopolis, along with a casualty, and this was long before Metal had cleared out those streets. While Boomer was observing the crime scene, Captain Charmy assigned me to interview the suspects and witnesses."

"One was the mafia leader, and another one was his...daughter."

"...mhm?" Natal nodded, as she glanced at Cal, waiting for him to continue.

"The guy's daughter was...well, gorgeous. At first, I tried to ignore it, but the more I tried to interview her, the more I started to like her. She knew I was beginning to like her, and in the end, she liked me too...or that's what I thought. Eventually the case was taken to court, and the case was whether or not his daughter had participated in the shootings. They found her not guilty because I did everything I could to prove that she was innocent, and I did a pretty good job...but when Boomer later provided the evidence to the Chaotix, the daughter was the one who had shot the innocent bystander."

"I asked her why she lied to me, and she laughed in my face, saying that she used me. That I was a desperate fool who would go for the first girl that was interested in me...in the midst of my hard feelings, I..."

Cal turned his back on Natal. "...I consulted some help from someone to...take care of her."

"...Metal Sonic." Natal muttered. "And in the end... he made you his subordinate."

"...the truth of that is that I was the one who found Metal Sonic buried in the snow..." Cal admitted. "...I was the one who reactivated him after his long years of sleep."

Hearing that positively shocked Natal, as she looked at Cal with a surprised look. "...so you brought him back on purpose...?" she uttered.

"Not on purpose," Cal said. "I activated him because I was curious what had happened to him, and when I mentioned the case...well, things escalated from there. Metal set out and killed the entire mafia...including the daughter that back stabbed me..."

"...and then he forced you to work for him, right?" Natal inquired, as she tilted her head.

"...I guess forced was a fitting word," Cal said. "The weight of all that death because of me was on my shoulders, and I felt like I had no choice."

"...sucks." Natal sighed, as she placed a hand on Cal's shoulder. "Do you... ever regret doing what you did? With Metal, I mean."

"...I don't know," Cal answered. "I was really confused then...I'm still kinda confused now..."

"...you're not really cut out for being a bad guy. I can tell just by looking at you." Natal said, as she gave Cal a pat on the back. "Give it some thought, why don't you."

"Yeah, I sort of figured that out last night..." Cal grumbled. "...I don't exactly need someone to tell me..."

"Sometimes, you do need to be reminded." Natal said, as she looked at Cal. "If that wasn't the case, I'd probably be an emotional wreck in a mental hospital somewhere..."

"...you're probably right," murmured Cal thoughtfully.

Natal looked at Cal for a short while, before smiling. "Just don't fuss over it." she said, as she gave Cal a quick peck on the cheek, before she began walking away. "I'm gonna go get dressed, so bathroom's occupied!" she called.

Cal touched the cheek she kissed. "...did she just...?" he turned as red as ever.

Just when he was somehow on the verge of cracking a small half-smile, he shook his head. *No...I can't get carried away with stuff like this,* he thought.

"Uncle Cal, are you okay?" he'd suddenly hear Tails Doll say, as the small doll was now literally sitting next to him. *"You're red all over. Is your body overheating?"*

Cal, being jumpy, was startled to see Tails Doll there. "Tails Doll? How long were you sitting there?"

"...since Natal began talking about that mission." Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"But why are you so red, Uncle Cal? Big Bro's likely made sure that you can't get a fever..."*

He saw what she did and didn't even know what it was or what it meant? Tails Doll was more child-like than Cal thought. "No, it's not a fever," he groaned. "Don't worry about it."

"Oh, that's a relief..." Tails Doll said, as he wiped his brow. " *...but why are you red, Uncle Cal?"*

"...as I said, don't worry about it," Cal said nervously.

"Okay..." Tails Doll nodded, as he looked down the hall where Natal had gone down. *"She's really nice, isn't she, Uncle Cal?"* he eventually said, as he looked up at the monkey.

Cal hesitated to answer, and when he looked down the same hall, he felt a strange feeling welt up inside him. "She's nicer than most people I've met, that's for sure," he said.

"Yeah, she's very nice..." Tails Doll nodded, as he glanced up at Cal. *"...I'm still weirded out by the red, though..."*

"So am I, Tails Doll," Cal murmured. "...so am I..."

Tails Doll blinked, before shrugging. *"I'm gonna go see if the kids are awake, yet."* he said, as he began fluttering away. *"Catch you later, Uncle Cal!"*

"...see ya," Cal muttered. He continued to stare down that hallway, thinking to himself.

Chapter 57

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

In the tombs, Johnny was sitting by himself, looking at some of the tombstones around him. *Not that I don't like it...* he thought, as he tapped his chin. *...but there's gotta be something else I can do on this island, instead of just spending* quality time *with Callous. If I gotta wait much longer for something different to happen...* Sighing, he tapped his forehead in thought.

Soon enough, Johnny was no longer alone. Deity walked in his presence, but he was more preoccupied with looking at each of the tombstones rather than making eye contact with Johnny. He looked deep in thought for some reason though.

Blinking, Johnny glanced at the vampire, but chose to keep silent. *Man... even when he's just walking around, he's giving off that vibe...* he thought.

Deity didn't even have to look at Johnny to sense his bother toward the vampire, but he paid no mind to it. He walked by each of the tombstones while touching them with a hand. Johnny could now notice that his hands were wrapped in a linen cloth, and surprisingly he had long, sharp, claw-like nails.

He put his hand on one tombstone. "Famine..." he said to it. Then he advanced to another one. "Disease..." he murmured to that one.

Onto another, "Same Famine..."

And another. "A deathly duel..."

And another. "Famine, again..."

...he's reading their deaths? Johnny thought, as he watched Deity with interest. *That's... kinda cool, actually.*

He stopped at one and looked at it much longer than the others. "…

Betrayal…" he murmured.

...that's a new one... Johnny thought, as he stood up, watching Deity.

Last one, he looked at it long and hard. "…Hm, this one died in their sleep…" he muttered.

...how does he do that, anyway...? Johnny thought, as he tilted his head whilst observing the vampire bat. *Is it because of Corruption? Didn't know the stuff allowed you to find out how people died...*

Deity took his hand off of the tombstone and started to pull the linen from his hands. Once he did, though, Johnny couldn't see what would be on them.

A strange dark marking on his palm began to radiate with a dark purple glow, only to Deity's eyes.

"…tell me Johnny," he suddenly spoke. "…do you believe in ghosts?"

Him actually speaking threw the lion off for a bit, but Johnny kept somewhat calm. "...ghosts, eh?" he began. "Never seen one, but I keep an open mind about it. So... guess you could say that I do."

Deity turned slightly enough that Johnny could then finally see the glowing mark on his palm. "I see," he murmured. "It is certainly a beneficial thing that you do…"

"...how so?" Johnny uttered, as he looked at the glowing mark with interest.

Deity unexpectedly slammed his hand into the tombstone, actually burrowing his fingers into the stone as the marking seeped through his palm to the back of his hand. "…because not only can I see them," he said. "But I can draw them out."

The marking from his hand appeared on the tombstone now, and it was of some undistinguishable symbol alien to anything from earth.

Seeing that, Johnny whistled. "Man, Corruption's pretty versatile, if it

can do that..." he mused.

"Indeed," Deity said, taking his hand away.

Something rose out of the tombstone, and it looked like a blurry illusion. All that could be clarified was that it was a pale white echidna maiden. But only shriveled eye-sockets were left, along with the wrinkled face with an open jaw, and the spirit let out a shrill of a screech.

"Ah…this one had suffered…" Deity murmured, unaffected by the shriek somehow.

"Hm..." Johnny nodded, as the shriek didn't affect him too much, either. "...you're the only one who knows how to do that, I take it?"

"Yes," Deity answered. Heaving his hand forward as if he pushed the spirit, it was forced to retreat right back into the tombstone, and shortly after, the marking on the tombstone disappeared.

Then Deity rewrapped his hand with the linen cloth he had taken off earlier.

Johnny nodded, as he looked at Deity's hand. "I bet that you've gotta be really skilled with Corruption to be able to do that..."

"My physical appearance may not show it, but I have been alive for more than 50 years, which would likely be a generous amount of time to hone my skills," He answered. "Callous has only been existent for 5 months since I constructed her."

"Aah, I get it..." Johnny nodded, as he looked at his own arms. "And I've only been versed in Corruption for a few days, so I bet it's gonna take a very long time for me to do anything like that."

"A longer amount time than you have, unfortunately." With that, Deity turned to walk away.

Blinking, Johnny watched as Deity left. *...what was that supposed to mean?* he thought, as he looked back down at his arm. *Does he... know when I'm going to die again?* Clenching his hands into fists, Johnny looked back at Deity. *Hm... sorry to disappoint, but I've*

cheated death once, and I can damn well do it again.

"Hey Boomer!" Ani said. "Would I be able to go back to the Clubhouse anytime soon?"

"Soon Ani," Boomer assured in annoyance. "Just be patient!"

"Yeah, it's still a bit early to go anywhere, y'know!" Newt said, as he glanced at the small husky.

"But I HAVE to go!" Ani protested.

"C'mon Ani, you don't need to get so worked up over it," Boomer groaned. "Why are you in such a hurry to get back to the Clubhouse anyway?"

Ani tried to think of an excuse. Her main reason is so that she could escape the wrath of King, but there could be so many other excuses she could make up. The problem was, she couldn't really think of one right at the moment.

"I just want to see my friends again!" Ani uttered.

"You'll be able to see them soon, so don't worry." they heard Sage say, as the raven entered the room they were in. "But you shouldn't go on your own."

"I know! That's why I've been bugging Boomer for the past hour," Ani said. "So she can take me."

"And she was really trying my patience too…" Boomer added, trying to restrain her temper as best as she could.

Sage chuckled, as she looked down at Ani. "Why can't you ask one of the Agents, though? I'm sure they wouldn't mind taking you there."

"Hey, good idea," Ani said. "Sage, would you take me back?"

"What? You're not asking your dad to take you back?" Boomer asked curiously.

"Oh…well, he can take me back too I guess," Ani said, turning back to Sage. "But can you Sage? Please?"

"Well, I could..." Sage nodded, as she rubbed her chin. "...but it would be proper manners for you to say your goodbyes first, Ani."

"Alrighty then," Ani said. "I think I'll go around and say my goodbyes then!" and Ani trotted off down the hall to see who she would run into, just so she could say her goodbyes.

If she were to encounter King, then she would have to keep her cool long enough to say a "goodbye" before she wimped out.

Soon enough, she'd come across Queen, who was standing by herself in the hallway, looking out of the window.

"Hi Queen," Ani greeted. Seeing her looking out the window, she cocked her head curiously. "What'cha doing?"

"...just thinking." Queen muttered, as she glanced down at Ani. "What about you?"

"I'm going back to the Clubhouse to my friends," Ani said. "So Sage suggested I say goodbye to everyone."

"I see..." Queen nodded, as she looked back out the window. "...that reminds me. King told me that he wanted to see you later on."

Ani's eyes shrank fearfully. "…what for?"

"He didn't say." Queen shrugged. "...well, give my best to your friends when you arrive there."

"Alright," Ani croaked, hurrying past Queen. *Please tell me he DIDN'T find out it was me!* She hoped in thought.

After a while, she found Miser, who was in a conversation with Ripper about something. Blinking, the rhino looked down at Ani. "Oh, hi, Ani." Miser said with a smile. "What's the rush?"

"You shouldn't run inside; you could trip and twist your ankle if you run about too much! Kekekekeke!" Ripper cackled.

"I'm going back to the Clubhouse and I wanted to say goodbye to everyone," Ani said, deciding not to mention anything about King with a grinning façade.

"Ah, I see..." Miser nodded, as she rubbed Ani's head. "Could you tell your friends that I said hi?"

Humming, Ripper tapped his chin. "...kekekeke... didn't King say that he wanted to talk to her?" he mused.

"...now that you mention it, he did." Miser said, as she glanced at Ripper. "I wonder why, though..."

Ani started to sweat. "Well, nice seeing you guys! Later!" and she hurried even faster down the hall.

Soon, she'd find Wiper wandering the halls as well, as he glanced curiously at Ani. "What's wrong?" he uttered.

"Oh, just saying goodbye to everyone," she repeated, trying to smile. "I'm going back to the Clubhouse!" She neglected to really answer Wiper's question on purpose.

"Really?" Wiper uttered in surprise. "Who's taking you there?"

"My Dad and Sage," Ani answered.

"I'm doing what now?" Hunter came into the hall looking down at Ani strangely.

"You're…uh, coming along to take me back to the Clubhouse!" Ani said, laughing a bit sheepishly.

"Really..." Wiper muttered, as he folded his arms. "...well, I'll see you around, I suppose." he said with a nod, before heading down the hall.

Hunter looked at Ani inquiringly. "You're leaving?"

"Well…" Ani's ears drooped guiltily. Last night was the most quality time she had to spend with her father. Instead of sleeping, they talked a long time since the full moon couldn't touch them in that

dark basement. They talked about so much, and even then, there was still so much more they could talk about. "…I miss my friends," she said. "But that doesn't mean I won't miss you, Dad." It still felt weird, but comforting to say that.

Hunter couldn't stop himself from smiling a little. "I'll miss you too," he said. "I'm glad that you want me to take you home."

Ani smiled too. "I should probably tell the rest goodbye," she said. "I have to say goodbye to Captain Charmy and…King."

"I'll come with you," Hunter offered.

The two then walked on through the hall together.

Soon, they entered the living room, where they found both Charmy and King, the latter with a cup of coffee in his hands. As the two entered, King regarded a silent nod to Hunter.

"Ah, good morning you two," Charmy said, while watching Hunter reply a nod to King.

"Hi Captain," Ani said. Then she turned hesitantly to King. "…hi King."

"Hi to you too, Ani." King said with a nod to Ani, before glancing at Hunter. "So what's up?"

"Me and Sage are taking Ani back to the Clubhouse," Hunter replied.

"I see," Charmy said. "Well, I hope you send them my greetings Ani. It's a shame you can't stay, but I suppose it can't be helped."

Ani laughed nervously again. "Yeah…"

"Yeah, it's a shame, but if ya wanna stay with your friends..." King said with a shrug, as he looked down at Ani. "...something on your mind?" he inquired.

"No, not at all!" Ani said, shaking her head hurriedly. "What makes you say that?"

"Well you don't look so good," Charmy added, rubbing his chin.

"…maybe I'm starting to catch something?" Ani supposed; hoping they'd buy that excuse.

"Hrm, that doesn't sound good..." King muttered, as he continued looking at Ani. "Maybe we should check your temperature before we let you go anywhere?"

"But I…" Ani tried to stay under control, but she was getting so intimidated by King's staring that her eyes began to water.

"…Ani?" Hunter noticed Ani shaking. He was startled when she grabbed him and buried her face in his middle, breaking down into scared tears. Hunter looked over at King questionably.

King, however, glanced at Hunter with a clueless expression, before he shrugged.

"Ani, what's wrong?" Hunter asked, kneeling by her.

"I-I smothered King in syrup and feathers while he was asleep, but Wiper told me he was going to kill whoever did that to him if he found out who it was!" Ani wept hysterically, as most of the words could barely be made out in her sobs. "I swear King! It was just for fun! I didn't mean anything to you by it!"

When she buried her face in Hunter again and cried, the older wolf gave the tiger a glare. In reality, Hunter had not been informed about any of this.

King was silent, as he looked at Ani. "...hey, don't cry over it, ya hear?" he said in a friendlier tone. "Why would I do something like that, anyway?"

"Cause Wiper told me that story about when you and Miser were on a mission and you killed the guys you were hunting because they stole your knife while you were taking a nap!" Ani replied.

"...he did, huh?" King uttered. *Sheesh, I just told him to scare her a bit, not to traumatize her...* At that point, King scratched his neck. "Well, I don't do that to kids."

Ani stopped crying, and turned to King in disbelief. For a minute, she stared at him like that.

Then when a scowl appeared on her face, a simple gesture of her hand splashed tea on King's face with telekinesis. "Turning you into a chicken man was funny!" she yelled. "Scaring me to death, WASN'T!"

With that, Ani stomped away, wiping her tears and totally embarrassed that she had cried like that in front of them.

King blinked, as he watched Ani stomp off like that. "...I suppose that wasn't completely uncalled for..." he muttered.

Hunter shook his head while he glared at King. "Ani, hold on a minute," he called, going after her.

Charmy sighed.

With a sigh of his own, King wiped the tea away from his face. *Note to self; don't get Wiper in on a prank next time...*

By the time Hunter caught up with Ani, she had made it back to Sage, Boomer and Newt. "Alright, I'm done saying my goodbyes!" Ani grumbled.

"What's got you in such a fowl mood?" Boomer asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Ani snapped grumpily.

"...okay, then..." Sage mused, as she glanced at Hunter. "All set?"

"For the most part," Hunter said. Seeing Ani was still mad, he set a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, calm down okay?" he said. "His joke was meant for meaningless fun too…even if it WAS in bad taste."

Ani didn't reply because she didn't want to talk right now.

"Right..." Sage nodded, as she began leading the two out of the building. "Hunter and I will be back soon."

"See ya around, Ani!" Newt called.

"…bye," she forced herself to call back, just so she wasn't rude.

Soon, the three exited the building, as both Ani and Hunter floated above the ground. "Both of you hold on!" Sage said, as she took flight, pulling Ani and Hunter after her.

Jill was just now healing her hands after having punched Metal so many times. Even in her Holy Form, it wore them down; just not as quickly as they did when she was her normal self.

" *You certainly did well, Jill.* " Metal said, as he was resting against a tree. " *Callous is never going to find out what hit her, at this rate.* "

" *I wonder if she's getting ready for the fight herself, or just wasting her time goofing off,"* Jill murmured.

" *It doesn't matter if she goofs around or not; you're going to win against her.* " Metal said, as he closed his eyes.

That's what you think, the voice in his mind chuckled.

Aah, I wondered if you were going to butt in. Metal replied. *Jill's gonna beat you, and then you'll be out of my system forever, Callous. I'd suggest that you start writing a will.*

I wouldn't be so sure on that, Callous remarked. *I'm pretty confident in my skills, and even then…I have insurance.*

Well, I'm confident in Jill's skills; confident enough to say that you stand no chance against her. Then, he glanced at Jill. *And about your insurance... it's not going to hold up. Not at all.*

Well instead of bragging about who's better than who, I've got us a location for us to meet for the battle, Callous said.

What, you're not going to show up here? Alright, where is this location you're talking about?

Why, Angel Island.

Metal blinked upon hearing that. *...how the hell did you get there?*

Mom was kind enough to let us in…after she got whooped by Daddy of course.

...Goddess... With a mental growl, Metal pressed his fingers against his head. *...Angel Island, huh? I suppose that works out. But it won't change anything; you're still going to lose.*

Fine, whatever, groaned Callous in annoyance. *Keep that to yourself. I'm going now.*

Take care. Metal responded. The fact that he had gotten Callous annoyed without losing his cool got a chuckle from him.

Jill reverted back to normal, looking at Metal strangely. "…Metal, what's going on with you?" Jill asked, having observed him a bit.

" *Hn?* " At that point, Metal just realized that, which got him to look away from Jill. " *N-nothing's going on. I was just imagining you beating Callous around the block, that's all.* "

Jill looked at him suspiciously, not buying it, but she dropped it anyway, checking her hands to see if they were back in shape.

...damn it, I got careless... Metal thought, as he glanced back at Jill. *I need her to focus on the fight. If she trains while worrying about me... it's going to complicate things.*

Jill opened her palm to a ball of light, and then a second and a third, and began juggling them around. "Well, now what?" she asked.

" *...well, we still have time before the match.* " Metal said with a shrug, as he glanced at Jill. " *Just a question, because I think it slipped my mind... but how did you usually train yourself before I started training you?* "

"I regulated a neutral state of mind at all times while I practiced manipulating Purity," Jill replied, preoccupied with the juggling lights. "So I was basically working on my mentality."

" *...really...* " Metal hummed, as he tilted his head. " *...have you ever done that in your holy form?* "

"No," she murmured. "Back then, I didn't think I could turn into my holy form as easily as I could now."

" *Right...* " Metal nodded, as he stood up. " *Well, how about this... for the rest of the day, you'll stay in your holy form and try to keep a neutral state of mind. Since tomorrow's the final day of training before the fight, you can decide what you need to practice on for the last day.* "

Jill stopped juggling and gave Metal a blank stare. "Uh…"

" *...what? Is there something wrong with that?* " Metal uttered, as he tilted his head.

Jill turned away in embarrassment. "Well, it's kind of silly how I do it…" she took a deep breath to say it. "…I sing."

" *...you sing.* " Metal said in a completely flat tone. " *...well? Is that a problem?* "

"…I'm too embarrassed to sing in front of someone," Jill admitted, still not looking at him.

" *...then I won't look.* " Metal said with a shrug. " *Is there a problem* now?"

Jill still had an issue with it, but she didn't want to irritate Metal with something trivial like this. "No," she answered; as she sat down criss-crossed with her back remaining toward Metal so she wouldn't feel as embarrassed.

" *Good.* " Metal said with a nod, as he turned to walk away. " *Sing to your heart's content; I'll be near the cave if you need me.* "

Jill didn't answer. She had begun to concentrate on transforming into her Holy Form, and as soon as the cocoon of light changed her, she hovered over the ground in a state of meditation.

After she bit her lip, she took another deep breath, and began.

" *May it be an evening star*

Shines down upon you

May it be as darkness falls

Your heart will be true

You walk a lonely road

Oh, how far you are from home."

Unknown to Jill, her voice carried, and with as far as Metal got, he could still hear her.

As he walked away, Metal listened in on the song Jill sung, making him stop. *...she certainly has talent,* he thought, before he continued walking, looking at his arms. *While you calm your own mind... I'll keep trying to synchronize Purity and Corruption.*

Jill felt more comfortable, and continued.

"Mornie utúlië (darkness has come)

Believe and you will find your way

Mornie alantië (darkness has fallen)

A promise lives within you now."

Back at the cave, Metal could see Chaos standing there, blankly staring past the metallix to where the singing was coming from.

" *...quite the singing voice she has, right?* " Metal said, as he walked a bit past Chaos, before sitting down in the cave. " *She's doing so to keep her mind focused. In the meantime...* " At that point, like before, Purity and Corruption coated both of his arms. " *...I have experiments to pull off.* "

Chaos glanced at Metal curiously, and then out to the wilderness.

"May it be the shadow's call

Will fly away

May it be you journey on

To light the day

When the night is overcome

You may rise to find the sun."

...let's try not pressing them against each other too violently... Metal thought, as he carefully placed his fingers against each other, waiting to see if it would cause some reaction between the two forces.

There was some build up that started, like before, but since Metal was being careful this time it didn't erupt in a bang.

" *Mornie utúlië (darkness has come)*

Believe and you will find your way

Mornie alantië (darkness has fallen)

A promise lives within you now

A promise lives within you now…"

When the singing stopped, Chaos looked back at Metal with a stunned look at what he was doing.

...here we go... Metal thought, as he observed the build-up. *Come on... is something going to happen?*

The build-up between his two fingers only sparked, and like before, imploded. Since this was a smaller amount, however, the worst it could do was jolt Metal like electricity.

" *Hngh...* " Closing his eyes, Metal pulled his arms away once more, as he looked at them. " *Again... there has to be some way they can be merged...* " he muttered, as he brought his arms closer to each other, but this time, making sure that while they were close, they weren't in contact with each other.

And again, the build up commenced…

Breakfast wasn't…TOO bad. Brick wasn't a bad cook, but Striker's eaten better; other then that, Striker was pretty excited when Brick said he might take them into Future City to ride Extreme Gears some more.

He got even more excited when he glanced out a window and saw three figures incoming toward the Clubhouse. At first, he didn't even know who they were, but a closer examination made his eyes light up.

"Ani's BACK!" he exclaimed, running through the halls.

Hearing Striker say that, Jack looked out from his room. "Ani's back?" he said in disbelief, as he ran after Striker.

This call gathered attention from the other kids, and soon they too followed Striker down the halls. They all headed for the balcony. This balcony overlooked a good portion of the jungle, along with a good view of the horizon, and conveniently enough, the three figures had landed here; Sage, Hunter and Ani.

"Ani!" Striker burst through the door leading outside and ran down after her, with Jack, Milo, Buddy and Rudy following.

"Guys!" Ani had still been grumpy for the ride, but seeing her friends immediately replaced her grouch with happiness, while the boys tackled the husky down in a doggie-pile, laughing.

"We're so glad you're back, Ani!" Rudy laughed.

"We've really missed you, Ani!" Jack said happily.

"...now that's just adorable." Sage said with a smile, as she closed her eyes.

Ani laughed, while she pushed off the boys with her telekinesis. "I missed you guys too!" she said, grabbing as many of them as she could into a hug.

Brick passed by the open doorway and saw the scene. "Ani!" Even

he was surprised seeing her here, so he ran down to them. "Did you just get back Ani?"

"Yep!" Ani answered.

" *Is Ani back?* " At that point, even Tails Doll shot out from the doorway, joining in on the group hug. " *I've really missed you!* "

"Well, I think we're almost done here." Sage noted, before she glanced at Hunter. "Now, what do you say?"

"I say we take our leave," Hunter said, which broke up the group hug as Ani came and wrapped her arms around him.

"I'll miss you Dad," she said.

"I'll miss you too," Hunter replied, "but now, hopefully, we'll be able visit each other."

"Well, see you guys around!" Sage said after Ani and Hunter broke up the hug. "We'll be at the HQ, if you need us!" Then, she took flight, pulling Hunter after her.

"BYE!" called out all the kids as they waved them away.

As soon as they were gone, Rudy and Ani initiated their special handshake again. "You won't believe what's happened here Ani!" Rudy said, throwing his hands up into the air.

"You're telling me!" Ani replied. "A bunch of stuff happened to me too!"

" *There's been happening a whole lot of stuff everywhere!* " Tails Doll said, as he fluttered over Ani and Rudy. " *And most of the stuff that's been happening just came right outta left field, too!* "

"Yeah, I know!" Ani agreed. "And—hold on, I gotta go see Captain Whisker and Proxy! I haven't seen them in awhile either!" Ani took off running into the Clubhouse with the boys and Brick following.

Then she stopped short in one room, and her smile fell.

Cal was still sitting there on the couch, and when he turned to notice Ani, he saw that she had a stupefied expression on her face when she saw him there.

" *...oh... this is kinda awkward...* " Tails Doll uttered, before he got in front of Ani. " *Listen... Big Bro said that he had to stay here, because of Callous chasing him...* " he said, hoping to make sure that there wouldn't be any fighting right when Ani had gotten home.

Ani looked between Tails Doll and Cal thoughtfully. She didn't have as much of a dispute with Cal as she did Metal, but she still didn't like the monkey. With a look of scorn at Cal, she walked away, hoping to find Captain Whisker or Proxy.

Cal didn't expect to see Ani here, and he blinked a moment, wondering what just happened.

" *...phew, dodged a bullet there...* " Tails Doll uttered, as he wiped his brow.

Eventually, Ani would come across Proxy, who was looking out of a window, seemingly unaware that Ani was walking towards him.

"Proxy!" Ani exclaimed.

Blinking, the android glanced in Ani's direction, before smiling. "Welcome home, Ani."

"Ani`s home?" At that point, the large pirate robot ran down the hall, looking down at Ani. "Shiver me timbers, she be! Welcome home, lass!" he said happily.

"Captain Whisker!" Ani laughed, throwing her arms around him.

As she did that, Whisker let out a hearty laugh. "Ye`re as quick as ever, Ani!" he said, as he looked down at Ani.

"What's with the racket?" they'd hear Natal say, as she walked down the hall towards them, just noticing the husky. "...Ani? You're back?" she said in disbelief.

"Yep!" Ani answered. "Hi Natal!"

"...hi, Ani." Natal replied, as she couldn't help but smile. "Nice to have you back."

"Nice to BE back!" she said. When she let go of Whisker, she gave the three of them inquiring looks. "What did I miss while I was gone?" she asked. "I didn't even think that Cal would be here…"

"A lot o' things has happened while ye be gone, Ani." Whisker said, as he folded his arms.

"For one thing, Jack has an evil uncle called Johnny, who tried masquerading as him to kill us... but Metal Sonic stopped him." Proxy began, as he folded his arms.

"And later, Callous and Johnny ambushed Brick and Cal, but Tails Doll held them off long enough for them to seek refuge at the clubhouse." Natal continued. "...but on a brighter side, Brick did make us all Extreme Gears."

Ani was silent while processing the information, but the only thing that appealed to her was what Natal last said. "Wait, Brick made us Extreme Gears?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Yep, and yours is still in my room," Brick said, coming into the hall. "We were planning to go ride them in Future City today, so you were pretty lucky coming home when you did."

"…COOOL! Ani howled excitedly.

"I think the only ones who he didn't make Extreme Gears for were the three robots currently in the house." Proxy said with a chuckle. "And... well, Tails Doll and I don't really need one."

"An' I dasn't think I`d be able t' get on one without breakin' 't! Yar har har har!" Whisker laughed.

"You guys are robots! You can just blast through!" Ani remarked. "Anyway, can I go see it Brick?"

"Sure, go ahead Ani."

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Ani blurted, tearing through the

halls with an incredible speed.

"...we should probably follow her, so she doesn't end up breaking anything." Proxy said with a chuckle, as he followed Ani down the hall.

"Yaaar, wait up!" Whisker called, as he ran after Proxy as well.

"...things are gonna get a lot more lively now." Natal said, as she couldn't help but let out a giggle.

"With Ani, things are always lively," Brick groaned, rubbing her ears because Ani's outcry hurt his hearing.

Chapter 58

CHAPTER – FIFTY-EIGHT

On his own in the dark tombs, Johnny was looking at one of the tombstones with interest. *...longer than I have left...* Deity's words still stuck with him, as he shifted his gaze towards his right hand. *...bull. If he can do it, why shouldn't I be able to?* With a nod, his right hand was covered in that dark aura, before he placed it on the tombstone.

Nothing really happened, despite how much Johnny concentrated the Corruption there. Throughout it all, Callous appeared nearby him and stopped to watch him. "...Ooookay, what are you doing?" she asked.

"...trying to do something Deity did." Johnny said, as he pulled away his arms with a scowl. "He pulled out a ghost from the tombstone... how did he do that, anyway?"

"Oh, that?" Callous said, understanding perfectly. "Beats me. I can't even do that...but one reason could be that Daddy doesn't have even an ounce of fear in him...or any feeling for that matter."

"Yeah?" Johnny uttered, before he looked at the tombstone. "Hmph... he said that it'd take longer to learn the technique than I had left, and I call bull on that." he growled, as he glanced at his hand again. "Maybe if I concentrate really hard on pulling out a ghost... it worked when I called a tentacle out from my palm, so it oughta work for pulling out ghosts." Then, as it was covered in Corruption again, he placed his hand on the tombstone, closing his eyes and really focusing.

But all Johnny got was a dark chuckle.

"You don't have the galls to mingle with the dead, boy. Go play somewhere else..."

Johnny blinked, as he looked around. "Who the hell... Callous, did

you hear that?" he uttered.

"Yeah, I did," Callous murmured with interest.

"Tsch..." Johnny growled, as he looked around. "Hey! Whoever the hell said that! What do you mean, I don't have the galls to mingle with the dead?"

"You're the kind of guy we laugh at in hell...you're no big shot."

"Tough words for a spirit," Callous remarked.

"...the hell are you talking about?" Johnny growled, as he dug his fingers into the tombstone without realizing it. "Come on out! I'll teach you not to mock me, you damn spirits!"

The spirit laughed, *"I would, but you'd have to pull me out, and you won't anytime soon by the looks of it!"*

Callous walked up to the tomb to read the name, but at it turned out, the name had been crusted off by the age of time. "Well, what luck."

"Go away, boy. Disturb someone else's tomb, why don't you?"

Johnny growled. "Like hell I will!" he yelled, as unbeknownst to him, his right arm began giving off a much darker glow than ever before. "Do you even know who I am? I could take on all of you goddamn spirits if you ever dared showing your faces outside of your resting places! No one makes a fool out of me!"

The Spirit continued to laugh. *"Just because you get angry, boy, doesn't make you something to be feared! You're only provoking my amusement further!"* A hand popped out of the tombstone and snared Johnny by the throat. *"Now, I told you to leave my grave..."*

However, even while choked, Johnny didn't back down, as he suddenly grabbed the arm as well. "You really don't know who I am, do you? I stared death right in the eye without even blinking, and I was pulled straight out from hell..." As he spoke, his arm began burning with a dark aura. "I know that I'm a whole lot braver than you, who doesn't even have the balls to stay in the game after he was kicked out!"

"So? I have to endure *hell. It was chance that you were pulled back out of it. Besides, you may have to confront something much more fearful than-!"*

"That's enough."

Ever so silent, yet, ever efficient in silencing the spirit. Deity walked in calmly, approaching the scene going on. The hand that held Johnny released him, and retreated immediately back into its grave.

Coughing after the arm let go of him, Johnny glared up at Deity. *...the dead are afraid of this guy, too?* he thought, as he gritted his teeth. *You've got to be...*

"Johnny," Deity spoke without looking at him. "When dealing with the dead, you cannot get angry. They will only pester you more, simply because they have nothing else to loose." Then he started walking away again. "Don't bother to intimidate them until you too, have not a single thing to loose."

Johnny blinked, as he watched Deity leave. *...nothing else to lose...* he thought, as he leaned against a wall to calm down. *...and don't get angry...* As he thought, he glanced back at Deity. *...why would he bother to give me tips, if he was the one who said that I didn't have long enough to learn it?*

Callous having watched the whole thing, glanced over at Johnny. She could tell that he was somewhat confused. "I don't know what he means, but you aught to watch out for Corruption, Johnny," Callous advised. "It even can take control of me if I loose it, and to tell the truth, I almost lost it with that doll awhile back."

"...yeah, you said something like that..." Johnny nodded, as he glanced at his hands. "...yeah, I oughta be more careful not to let it get under my skin... like that ghost did..."

"But even if the ghosts have nothing else to loose..." Callous looked at where Deity had left. "...it leaves be baffled how they're still afraid of him."

"...maybe he has some form of reputation." Johnny muttered, as he

folded his arms. "...but I'm not gonna let that be a hindrance. I'll show those ghosts... hell, I'll show Corruption itself that it can't control me."

"Believe me when I say that Corruption is aggressive," Callous warned. "If you get involved with a power struggle against it...well, it certainly won't be pretty."

"...hm." Johnny nodded, as he closed his eyes. "It'll probably be a chore to try and co-exist peacefully with it, though..."

"Tell me about it," Callous groaned in agreement.

Chaos had been standing there for the past half-hour watching Metal try and fail at what he was trying to do.

Hrm... no change. Metal thought, as he clenched his hands together. *No matter how cautious I am, it always ends up imploding in my face...* Groaning, Metal brought his arms closer once again. *But it has to work eventually...*

No, it didn't work. The build-up happened, and shortened out, as usual. However, something strange started to occur with the Corruption arm...

Blinking, Metal glanced at that arm, holding it with his Purity arm. *...come on... I have a feeling that I'm getting closer to a revelation here... don't act up on me!* he thought.

At first the Corruption had began a small growth farther up his arm, but once Metal administered Purity to it, it tamed it back to a point that the Corruption vanished from his arm completely.

Metal began breathing heavily, before slamming his arm into the ground. "Damn it!" he yelled, before rubbing his temples. "So close... and yet so far away... damn it..."

Chaos was baffled from most of what was going on with Metal, but soon he turned his head into the wilderness. Jill had fallen silent long ago, after she had sung that song, and the creature wondered what she was up to as well.

Metal, however, didn't seem that interested in Jill at the moment, as he looked at his arms again. *...I can't give up yet.* he thought, as he clenched his arms. *There has to be a way to merge them... if there was only some way to...* As he thought that, he blinked, before he looked down at his own chassis. ...maybe...

Chaos somehow sensed Metal's idea, and his head jolted back onto the metallix angrily, letting out a subtle, warning growl. He wouldn't dare let Metal use the Chaos Emerald for a silly experiment such as this.

Noticing Chaos, Metal got on his feet. *"Listen, I've tried countless times to merge* Purity *and* Corruption *, with no success."* he said, as he folded his arms. *"What if those two forces need an anchor to be properly merged? Namely,* Chaos Energy *."* Then, he sighed. *"I'll only try it once... but I really need to see if my theory actually has some basis. Alright?"*

Chaos didn't like it one bit, but the creature couldn't argue it over. He simply turned away in silence, having no choice but to let him try it out.

"...thank you." Metal muttered, as he sat down again, before removing the Chaos Emerald from his body. *...if this doesn't work... then I give up.* he thought, as he held his arms close to the emerald, just as Purity and Corruption covered them again.

The Chaos Emerald began to glow, along with the build-up between Purity and Corruption surrounding it. Unlike before where the build-up between the two exploded, the two somehow began to swirl around the Chaos Emerald while it continued to illuminate.

...yes... Metal thought, as he observed this. *It's... it's actually working... what could this cause?* As he thought this, he looked at the emerald with a very interested look.

The Emerald managed to keep the energies at bay, and soon, the energies began to transform into something else...

...but the Corruption decided to act up again, and it started growing

out of control by consuming more than it should.

"Hm!" Seeing this, Metal began applying more Purity than Corruption. *"You listen here... there is not going to be any dispute... there is going to be a fine equality between you two..."* he muttered, as if he was talking to the Corruption itself as a person. *"You won't be in control... Purity won't be in control... not even* Chaos *will be in control... you will be merged, and all the forces involved will be equal!"*

Even with the addition of more Purity, Corruption would only eat up some of the Chaos Energy and advance further.

"...damn it, you're not gonna listen to reason..." At that point, Metal's Purity arm began glowing even brighter, while his Corruption arm began losing its dark glow. *"This merging needs to be equal! I'm this close to a breakthrough... do not make all this effort in vain, Corruption!"*

Corruption diminished a lot due to the rapid increase of Purity, but to a point where Corruption actually departed from Metal's arm, leaving only Purity and Chaos Energy circling calmly around the Chaos Emerald.

Seeing this, Metal let out a disappointed groan, before placing the emerald on the ground, removing his arms from it. *"Damn it, damn it, DAMN IT!"* he yelled, as he knocked himself on the head. *"Just when I seem to get it... damn it all!"*

Chaos picked up the emerald while watching him beat himself up like this.

"...well, there you have it, Chaos *."* Metal muttered, as he leant his head against the wall, looking up at the cave's ceiling. *"I failed... my theory has some basis... but in the end, I couldn't control the* Corruption *, and it all fell apart..."* Then, he closed his eyes, before chuckling. *"Hmph... another failure to add to the list..."*

Suddenly, a screamed pierced through the air. Chaos jerked his head back, for while it was in Jill's direction, the scream didn't

belong to Jill.

Blinking, Metal glanced in that direction as well. *"...what in the...?"* Without a word, a tendril from Metal's body quickly snatched the Chaos Emerald from Chaos, before the Metallix rushed out of the cave. *Just who on earth was that?* he thought, as he placed the emerald in his body again.

Once Metal got through the wilderness to the pond, the first sight he'd see is a white hedgehog on his backside. With the five extra quills on his forehead, and yellow eyes, he was garbed with blue boots and golden rings around his wrist. Metal could easily recognize this as Silver the Hedgehog.

And Silver was staring in utter shock out at the pond.

Blinking, Metal looked at the hedgehog with a bewildered look. *"...oh, you have got to be kidding me."* he groaned, as he rubbed his temples. *"How... why... when did you come from, now?"* he muttered, as he glared at Silver, before he happened to glance at where Silver was looking. *"...hm?"*

Nearby the pond, Metal saw that Jill was lying unconscious on the grass, and she wasn't in her Holy Form. However, that wasn't what Silver was staring at.

Standing on the pond on its very waters was a strange, crystal-like, glowing green figure. As it began to turn around to face the direction Metal was, this would be the time Chaos would make it here, and the figure could be distinguished.

It looked like Jill.

Metal blinked, as he looked from Jill to this strange, crystallized version of her. *"...what on earth...?"* he uttered, as he slowly approached the figure. *...this can't be...* he thought.

Silver finally noticed Metal there when he was walking toward the crystallized Jill. *...isn't that Metal Sonic?* he thought. Chaos remained stationary where he was, but this sight was just as amazing as it was to Metal or Silver, and while Metal went toward

the figure, the figure only looked at him while standing on the very surface of the water.

"...who are you?" Metal uttered, as he stopped by the edge of the pond. *"You..."* As he spoke, he glanced at Jill. *"...you're not Jillian..."* he began, before looking back at the figure. *"...answer me. Who are you?"*

The figure looked at Metal, tilting its head. It was very calm, and in a way, looked gentle. Slowly, the figure walked across the water's surface, leaving only tiny ripples as it walked toward Metal.

"...not going to answer, huh..." Metal muttered, as he blinked, before he slowly stretched his arm out to the figure. *...what am I doing?* he thought, as he kept looking at the figure.

Seeing Metal stretch his arm out, the figure also extended an arm to him.

Silver stood up while watching this going on in complete wonder and confusion.

...it seems friendly... Metal thought, as he began moving towards the towards the figure, walking on the water's surface as well. *...again, what am I doing? What could I possibly gain from this?*

"Whoa..." Silver didn't think that would happen.

Metal got close enough to the figure that their fingers touched. When that happened, Metal could suddenly hear a voice in his head.

...Metal?

Metal was, naturally, surprised by the sudden voice in his head. *...yes?* he thought.

The figure reached to touch Metal's face. *It's me, Metal...It's Jill.*

Metal was stunned beyond compare. *...really?* he thought. *But... how does that work? Your body is over there...*

I know... The figure looked Metal right in the eye. *...its my soul...somehow its my soul.*

...your soul... Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. *...maybe a case of constant meditation, along with being in your Holy form...* Then, he sighed. *Guess we did make some progress today, after all...*

Jill's soul walked past the metallix toward her body, and the minute that she set both feet on land, Metal felt that he could no longer stand on the water. In fact, he fell in . *"HN?"* It didn't take long after he fell for him to activate his rocket boosters, which lifted him out of the water. *"Of all the..."* Metal grumbled, before he glanced towards Jill.

Her soul walked to the feet of her body, and looked down at it a moment. Then she looked over to Silver and Chaos, and when Silver turned to look away, he discovered to his surprise Chaos was standing next to him. Her soul then turned her back to her body, and allowed a gentle free-fall backward onto it, fading away when it would hit the body.

After that, Jill's eyes popped open as she took in a big gasp of air and sat up.

"Jill?" Seeing Jill wake up, Metal flew towards her, landing right next to her. *"Are you alright?"* he asked.

"I'm okay...but that was incredible..." she muttered.

"...so that was you?" Silver asked, walking up to her.

Jill gave Silver a nod.

"Her soul, to be precise..." Metal muttered, as he folded his arms. *"Incredible... I didn't even know that you could do that..."* As he said that, he closed his eyes again. *...somehow... seeing that only made my failure even worse...* he thought.

"I didn't know I could do that either..." Jill uttered. "It just happened."

Silver looked at them for a good long while in confusion. Not only

had he not seen anything like someone's soul detached from their body, but seeing that this person conversed with one of Dr. Eggman's robots in a friendly manner. Not to mention Chaos, the God of Destruction, was standing in their presence. "...can anyone tell me what's going on?" he asked, scratching the puzzled itch he had on his head.

"...perhaps Jill can tell you..." Metal began, before he glared at Silver. "...after you've told us what you're doing here." Obviously, Metal wanted to know just what business the silver hedgehog had here; from what he understood, Silver was likely dead in this time and age, so he must have come from the past.

Silver issued a point at him. "I didn't do anything, Metal Sonic! I was brought here by a strange occurrence of unnatural energy, and when I came to check it out, things happened a lot faster than I could comprehend!"

"...you're Silver..." Jill suddenly said, catching the hedgehog off guard with a surprised look. "Silver the Hedgehog..."

"...you know me?" Silver asked, directing his point at himself. When Jill nodded, Silver's eyes widened. "How?"

"The Professor said some things about you in one of his stories," Jill answered again.

"One that involved a mad version of my creator who wanted to turn the world into a card." Metal muttered dryly, before he glanced at Jill. "Try filling him in about our current situation, Jill; hopefully, it shouldn't take too long."

"No, hold on a minute," Jill stood up to Silver. "Can you specify some of the things that happened to you?"

Silver took a deep breath while he scratched his head again. "Well, all I remember is that somehow, after I defeated Ifrit and Eggman Nega...well, I should tell that story shouldn't I?"

"Oh, no need," Jill said, shaking her head. "I know the story...the Professor told me it once."

Silver blinked. "...who is this Professor anyway?"

"You may know him as Tails," Jill said.

"Really?"

"Silver, what happened?"

"Oh yeah...After some others and I defeated Ifrit and Eggman Nega, I decided to stay at that present time since, well, Eggman Nega was hopefully gone for good. At first, things were alright, but something else started happening." Silver paced around while he tried to recollect the things that had happened to him. "I sensed a very disturbing presence of energy and I had no idea what it was, but when I went to investigate it..." He took in a deep breath seeing as what he was trying to remember was pretty stressful. "...it looked like some black hole, and before I knew it I was sucked in..."

"...a black hole..." Metal muttered, as he glanced at Silver. *"...that energy you sensed..."* Closing his eyes, Metal allowed his hand to be engulfed by a dark aura. *"...it wouldn't happen to be this, would it?"*

Silver looked hard at it. "Something like that, but it had more to it...I could even sense some Chaos Energy lingering in the presence, but it was obscured by these other energies that...clashed together so much..." When something hit him, he shot Metal an accusing point. "Wait a minute, how did you have a hunch about what I sensed? Did you have something to do with it?"

"Silver, don't jump to any conclusions here," Jill said, distancing Silver with her hands.

"...clashed together?" Metal's eyes widened, as the dark glow around his hand vanished. *"Don't tell me..."* Quickly, he pulled the green Chaos Emerald out from his body, looking at it intently. *...I don't believe it... it actually worked?* he thought.

"...Metal?" Jill was amazed that Metal might have had some idea of what happened.

"...I... tried to merge Purity and Corruption, using the Chaos Emerald as an anchor to keep the two forces from imploding in my face..." Metal began, as he looked at the emerald in awe. *"...but the Corruption began dominating in the merger, going against the balanced fusion I had intended... so I deemed the idea a failure."* Then, he looked at Silver. *"But... apparently, it wasn't a failure... it was an astounding success."*

"Yanking me from one time to another was a success?" Silver barked offensively. "You've got to be careful! I don't know what this "Purity" or "Corruption" is, but the fabric of time is delicate!" he couldn't believe Metal Sonic would be so reckless with time travel like that.

"Silver, please! Calm down!" Jill calmed Silver down a little, but the hedgehog was still mad.

"...how can other energies mess with the cosmic, time-warp energies of the Chaos Emeralds like that, anyway?" Silver asked.

"Hell if I know." Metal muttered, as he looked back at the emerald. *"All I know is that this requires more investigation... if Corruption briefly dominating in a power struggle caused a rift in time... imagine what could happen if the three forces were in perfect sync?"*

"Metal, I'm not sure you should keep trying to do that," Jill murmured nervously. "If Silver's here because of that experiment, imagine what else it might do if you keep going." Then she glanced at Metal's arm. "And what if you continue to use Corruption to a point where it starts...going out of control?"

"...it's a price I'll have to pay, then." Metal muttered, as he glanced at Jill. *"I have a feeling that if I can pull a perfect merger off, it could cause something that could work heavily in our favor, Jill."* As he spoke, he glanced back at the emerald. "It could even help us in finally killing Novagod."

Silver looked questionably at him. "...kill who now?"

Jill sighed in disdain. She really didn't want Metal to continue with

this, because she knew how dangerous the clash of Purity and Corruption was, but if he was using the Chaos Emerald with it as well...not only that, but Silver had so much to explain to Silver that it would take so long. "...go ahead and take a seat, Silver," she said. "There's a lot that I may need to tell you."

Ani sure was happy with her gear, and it wasn't long at all until Brick took the kids and left for Future City, via the train.

That thankfully left some time for Cal to be alone without the disturbance of loud children. He was sitting out on the balcony by himself staring at the horizon.

"How're you doing?" Cal would hear Natal say from inside the house. The only ones apart from Cal who hadn't gone along with Brick to Future City were Natal and Proxy, mostly because they needed someone to watch the place aside from Cal.

"Okay," Cal replied. Part of him was wondering what Metal was doing and whether or not he was going to call in to check up soon.

"...the kids are off to have fun in the city..." Natal mused, as she walked out on the balcony, standing next to Cal as she watched the horizon. "...I'm gonna be really depressed, when this whole thing ends, and I have to go back to work..." she muttered.

"...how come you're speaking more?" Cal asked out of the blue. "Is it because you've spent time with Jill and her friends?"

"...I only really talk a lot when I have things on my mind I want to say out loud." Natal said, as she closed her eyes. "Usually, it doesn't happen too often... but being with Jill and the others for so long... I've gotten a bit more comfortable with talking more often."

Cal stood up from where he sat between the railing on the balcony, looking at Natal. "But why talk to me?"

"Why not?" Natal said with a shrug, as she looked at Cal as well. "You seem like an alright guy. A little misguided, sure, but aren't we all, sometimes?"

"Really?" Cal looked away from her. "Even with all the things I did,

you think that?"

"As I said, I don't think you're cut out to be a bad guy." Natal said with a smile, as she placed a hand on Cal's shoulder. "Sure, you did some nasty things... but so did Metal Sonic, and look at what he's doing now." Then, she closed her eyes. "I guess what I'm getting at is... everyone deserves a second chance."

...and Jill is giving Metal that second chance, Cal thought. *...while Natal is giving me mine...* He didn't realize what he was doing, but he reached up while in his thoughts and set his own hand on Natal's hand on his shoulder.

"Ah..." Natal uttered in surprise when she felt Cal's hand, as a light pink color flushed her cheeks. "...you... feeling alright, Cal?" she asked, as she tilted her head.

"Hm?" Cal finally noticed what he was doing and his hand retreat hurriedly while he turned red. "Oh, sorry, I..."

"No, don't..." Natal shot in, as she scratched the back of her neck. "...don't apologize. No need for that. You just... surprised me, is all."

Cal felt embarrassed, and he took off his glasses to clean them because for some reason they got steamed up. Right then, he stopped, and looked back up at Natal with his yellow eyes.

Natal blinked, as she was looking at Cal's eyes as well. "...um..." Clearing her throat to regain some composure, she eventually took off her own glasses as well. "...strange. I never really noticed your eyes until now..." she muttered.

"...I didn't notice yours either," Cal muttered. "They're...pretty." He didn't believe what just came out of his mouth, but he didn't worry so much about it right now.

"...really?" Natal uttered, as she couldn't help but let out a short giggle. "Well... yours are pretty, too." she eventually said, letting out another giggle, without noticing her cheeks blushing again.

Cal didn't stop himself from smiling. That giggle sounded cute to him, and he was drinking up her image in awe. He didn't know what

was happening to him, even when he slowly reached forward and gave her a small kiss on her lips, but he pulled away with shock at what he was doing.

Even Natal was a bit surprised by it, as she blushed even more. However, her surprise was quickly switched by more giggling. "Guess that makes us even, huh?" she said, as she scratched her cheek in embarrassment.

"...not yet it doesn't," Cal replied, chuckling. "You kissed me twice, remember?" So the monkey leaned in and kissed her again.

After he had kissed her, Natal couldn't help but grab Cal in a hug. "...yeah... guess we're even now..." After a short while, however, she kissed Cal again. "And now we're not." she giggled.

Cal smirked. "Now how in the world did you get to be such a tease?" Nonetheless, he pulled her closer and kissed her again.

Briefly breaking away, Natal smirked. "Comes with the job, I guess." she said, before she moved in for another kiss.

Cal didn't want to break away now. Even with Natal being such a flirt, he could detect her heart rate increasing through the various mechanical devices in his body, and that was making his own organic heart pound through his chest. So he continued to kiss her. Natal, too, had no desire to break away, as she held Cal tighter whilst they kissed. She could practically feel both of their heartbeats as she held him so tightly. Cal was blown away by the passion erupting from them both, but that didn't hold him back from this. He clutched Natal too, feeling like he really needed her.

After a little while, however, Natal broke away from the kiss, without letting go of Cal. "...um... is it okay if we... use our tongues?" she asked with a blush. "Because... mine's very long, and..."

"uh...sure, it's okay," Cal replied, wondering curiously what that would be like.

"...thank you." Natal said with a smile, before she moved in to kiss Cal again. This time, however, she allowed herself to let her tongue

into Cal's mouth, letting it dance about with Cal's own tongue; with it being elongated, it would feel unlike anything else. While Cal was incredibly surprised by it, he found that he liked it...a lot. It sent such an excited tingle down his spine, and to his tail, which began stroking Natal's leg on its own while he kissed her. Natal felt a tingle go down her spine whilst Cal's tail caressed her, as she began stroking the back of Cal's head, whilst deepening the kiss. Cal's hands moved across Natal's back, and while he was somewhat afraid of her reaction to this, slowly came over to touch her breasts. Natal couldn't help but moan in pleasure when Cal did that, but she didn't pull away or try to stop Cal from doing so, allowing him to do as he pleased. Hearing her moan made Cal want to continue all the more, but he suddenly remembered that they were on the balcony outside while this was going on, so he broke away gently without letting her go.

"If this is going to go farther, then I suggest we take it to a more private place," he whispered.

"...I agree." Natal nodded, as she glanced in towards the Clubhouse. "...my room. We can continue there."

"Alright then," Cal murmured. "Lead the way."

"Sure." Natal nodded, as she pulled Cal after her towards her room.

The kids couldn't wait until the train stopped in the Future City station, and they pushed and shoved their way out when it arrived. Brick just laughed, and it warmed him how eager they were.

"So Brick, where do we go first?" Rudy asked, hopping around.

"Well, we have to get our Extreme Gears registered first before we can take it out onto the tracks," Brick said.

"Ah, that's right..." Jack nodded, as he held his Extreme Gear ready. "I wonder what we'll call our Gears, though!"

"Yaar, this could be quite th' interestin' event!" Whisker laughed, as he and Tails Doll got out of the train as well.

"Too bad that Natal didn't want to come, though..." Tails Doll chimed

in.

For whatever reason Natal wanted to stay back at the Clubhouse, Brick didn't want to know. Ever since he overheard the conversation between her and Cal before breakfast, he had the feeling that something was going on between them. Even if Proxy was there, Natal and Cal were pretty much alone.

That made Brick shudder.

"What's wrong Brick?" Striker asked, noticing this.

"It's nothing," Brick assured. "Just a little cold is all. C'mon." With the kids following, Brick led them out the door of the station and into the large city. It was so big, it made the kids gape and stare in amazement. The flying cars were also really interesting to watch as they passed by in highway tubes above them.

"Wow!" Milo uttered.

Ani just shrugged, "eh, I've seen better."

"Woah..." Jack uttered, as he looked up in awe at this sight.

"Well, I`ll be..." Whisker said, as he placed his hands on his hips. "Ye dasn't be seein' things like this on th' high seas..."

"This is so cool!" Tails Doll said, as he looked around excitedly. *"Where should we go first?"*

"Well, this way is the registration center," Brick said, walking down the sidewalk with the kids and Whisker following. "We pick out names for our gears and once we have 'em entered in, they give us the registration forms to show to the owners of the courses, so that we can-!" he was suddenly cut off when he felt his foot hit something, and he tripped onto the ground.

Once he tripped, there was laughter that followed.

The kids saw that someone had tripped Brick with their foot. They were a couple hawks, and the one that tripped him had her feathers wound-up in pigtails. She couldn't have been less than 14 years of

age, but he had a snotty attitude that was apparent on her face. Right now, she was sneering at Brick who was on the ground. "Oops, sorry! Didn't see you there!" she snorted.

The other hawk seemed to be around Brick's age, and he had his feathers in a very long ponytail, that he actually hung over his shoulder. He was leaning against a wall, smirking as he glanced down at Brick.

"Hey, stop lying!" Jack said, as he glared at the female hawk. "I saw you; you tripped Brick on purpose!"

"...so?" the male hawk scoffed, as he glanced at Jack with a raised eyebrow. "You have a problem with that, or what?"

"...yeah, I do!" Jack retorted. "You can't just trip people for no reason; it's not nice!"

"...you kidding?" At that point, the male hawk laughed. "What are you, six? Who goes around and says that doing stuff like that 'ain't nice'? Honestly..."

Once Brick got back up, he glared at the two of them. "Who the hell do you think you are anyway?" he growled.

"We're the Babylon Rogues, who else?" the female hawk retorted.

The kids stared at them.

"...but you guys can't be the Babylon Rogues," Striker said.

"...and why is that?" the male hawk scoffed, as he looked down at Striker.

"...because you're not the Babylon Rogues ." Tails Doll said matter-of-factly.

"Please. I think we know better than you if we're the Babylon Rogues or not." the male hawk scoffed, as he cracked his neck. "The name's Punk the Hawk, grandson of Jet the Hawk! And this is my sister, Gale."

Brick shot them shocked looks. "You're Jet's grandchildren?"

"Duh!" Gale snorted again. "Look at that Punk, this guy actually heard of our grandpa, and I thought he was just a piece of amateur trash that was passing by..."

Ani stepped up to her, jabbing a finger at her. "Just because your grandpa might have that kind of reputation, doesn't mean you guys can assume that you have it too! After all, your grandpa earned his title by racing the famous Sonic the Hedgehog! All you've done is a stupid thing, like tripping our friend!"

"Yeah!" the kids agreed, backing her up.

At that point, Punk began laughing loudly. "HAH! Did'ja hear that, Gale? All we've- oh, man, that's a good one! All we've done- kid, you oughta take up a career in stand-up!"

"...what's that supposed to mean?" Jack uttered.

"Come on; you're talking to the current champion of Extreme Gear racing, for five years straight!" Punk said, as he folded his arms. "And that's not counting what we do during the night!"

"Big whop, City Boy," Brick grumbled.

"Oh, it IS a big whop," Gale remarked. "If you think it's not such a big deal, then why don't you race us, Cowboy?"

Brick's vein popped out in his head in the sheer anger, and Milo stepped away from Brick fearfully. "What...did...you...call...ME?" he bellowed.

"What, so not only do we have a childish lion, but a deaf bull to deal with?" Punk said, before sighing. "Look, let me spell it out for ya, because I feel in a good mood." Then, he took a deep breath, before grinning. "She. Called. You. A. Cowboy. Did. You. Get. It. This. Time. Cowboy?"

"Hey, don't make fun of Brick, you meanies!" Jack said angrily, as he pulled out his harmonica, glaring at the two hawks.

Brick felt an overwhelming urge to sock Punk in the face right there, but he only got as far as grabbing him which startled the kids. After what happened with Cal, Rudy was actually afraid that Brick was going to punch him, but Brick remembered to restrain himself.

"Listen, City Boy," he spoke, "A smart mouth like yours has no place to be yakking off at us."

"Well, what are you gonna do about it, farmboy?" Punk scoffed, as he suddenly grabbed Brick as well. "Unless you wanna start a fight, I suggest you get you kids, and get the hell outta my-"

"Enough." a low, raspy voice muttered, which actually got Punk to shut up, as one could see the color fade from his face. "Leave them be, Rogues."

"...Lock?" Punk uttered, as he glanced at where the voice had come from. As it turned out, it was someone wearing a trenchcoat, with a wide fedora covering his face from view. What the group would immediately notice about this person was the massive rifle hanging on his back.

Gale growled as she stared at the figure, "C'mon Punk. We don't need to waste time with them anyway..."

"Yeah, Punk," Brick sneered, pushing him away. "Why not go back to your grandpa? Give him greetings from Professor Prower."

"...tsch. You got lucky." Punk scoffed, as he turned away, motioning for Gale to follow him, as they walked off.

"...wow..." Blinking, Jack glanced at the figure, who only kept standing there. "...um... can we help you, sir?"

"Just stay out of trouble." the person muttered, as he tipped his hat to the others. "That'll be enough."

"Wait a minute," Striker said. "Who are you?"

"...a bounty hunter." the person said, as he lifted his hat just a bit, which allowed them not only to see some form of scar running across his mouth, but also a chipped, oversized canine sticking out

of his mouth. "Call me Lock." At that point, he turned around, walking off. "Lock the Sniper."

"Lock the-?" Brick had been pretty surprised to hear that Gale and Punk were Jet's grandchildren, but this character certainly shocked him even more. "Wait! You're...you're not related to Fang the Sniper...are you?" Brick was curious and he had to be sure.

Lock stopped walking, as he glanced back at Brick. "...yeah, I am." he said in a cold tone. "Why does it matter to you?"

Brick flinched at Lock's cold voice. "...uh, just curious..."

"...curiosity killed the cat." Lock muttered, as he looked away, before starting to walk off again. "Keep yourselves out of trouble, now."

"...man, that guy is scary..." Tails Doll uttered once Lock was gone, as he was hiding behind Whisker in fright.

"I wonder what his story is," Ani murmured.

Brick remembered back at the darker stories that Tails had told him. Supposedly, the same one who killed Sonic and Knuckles had killed Fang the Sniper as well. Recently they found out who killed Sonic the Hedgehog, and making the connection, he figured that Deity Novagod killed Fang. He wondered if Lock was concerned about that.

"...Brick?" Milo muttered, tugging at his arm.

"C'mon, lets go get our gears registered," Brick said.

Meanwhile, Gale was griping to her brother. "Stupid amateurs...just because they're protected by Lock, doesn't mean they can walk all over us!"

"What I wanna know is where the hell Lock came from!" Punk growled, as he rubbed his temples. "Last time I checked, he had a large prize on his head, and he's still visiting the town? Either he's got the biggest pair in the world, or people are just so afraid of him that they don't dare to take him in!"

"Then we'll be the ones to take him in one day," Gale promised. Then she yawned. "What the hell did he mean when he said 'send greetings from Professor Prower,' anyway?"

"...he talked about Gramps..." Punk muttered, as he folded his arms. "Prower... Miles Prower...?" Blinking, Punk glanced at Gale. "...you don't think he's talking about Wave's rival?"

"Seriously?" That kind of suggestion was a crazy one to Gale. "How would those goons know of Miles Prower?"

"I have no idea..." Punk muttered, as he folded his arms. "...but we oughta find out. They were talking about registering their Extreme Gears, weren't they?"

Gale rubbed her beak. "Yeah...they were."

"So... obviously, that means that they're gonna do a race later on, right?" Punk continued, as he waited to see if Gale got where he was going with this.

"I get'cha," Gale chuckled. "Fist fights won't get us anywhere, but whipping them at an Extreme Gear race will show them." Then her chuckling advanced to laughter. "Heck! We could get Grandpa to watch! When he sees how bad they are, they'll be ashamed to show their faces when he gets through insulting them!"

"Yeah, if we can get him outta bed." Punk noted, as he cracked his neck. "But we go and race them, and get to know how those people know Prower. It's foolproof!"

"This ought to be a fun day," Gale said with a wide smirk.

Chapter 59

CHAPTER – FIFTY-NINE

It wasn't long at all until the kids got their gears registered. Ani had hers named "Soaring Moon," Striker named his "Home Run," Brick named his "Raging Bull," and Rudy named his "Joey." The kids argued that Rudy's name wasn't a good name for an Extreme Gear, but Brick told them that it was Rudy's gear and he could name his gear whatever he wanted. Jack, on the other hand, had named his Extreme Gear "Proud Lion", mainly because he thought it sounded cool.

"Don't you guys think so, too?" Jack said with a grin.

"Yeah, it sounds really cool, Jack!" Tails Doll chimed in.

"Glad you're all happy with your gears, guys," Brick said. "I guess we'll have to register Natal's gear another time."

"Okay, so when do we get to ride the Extreme Gear courses?" Rudy pestered, hopping up and down again.

"Each course is different according to the different types of gears," Brick explained. "There's a Speed course, a Fly course, and a Power course. There's some courses that have all three too. Maybe we can start on the single-type courses."

"I've got a Speed type!" Striker said, holding up his Home Run.

"Me too!" Rudy added, holding up Joey.

"I've got a Fly type," Ani threw in.

"I got a Power type!" Jack said as he held up Proud Lion. "That means that I-"

"Get to race me, it seems." That cold voice was impossible not to recognize, as Jack glanced towards a bench, where, sure as rain,

Lock was sitting, his arms folded.

"He's not the only one; I've got a Power-type too," Brick said, with his Raging Bull tucked under his arm. "I didn't know you raced Extreme Gear, Lock."

"Then again, you know little about me to begin with." Lock said in that same cold tone, glancing at Brick. "It's a past time of mine. I race to keep my mind off things."

"I see," Brick said. He looked at the kids to see how he was going to plan it out. "Ani, can I trust that you'll be alright racing by yourself on the Fly course?" he asked.

Ani grinned, tucking Soaring Moon under her arms. "Sure thing," she said.

"Good then," Brick said, while turning to Whisker. "Whisker, would you take Striker and Rudy to the Speed course?"

"Yaar, ye can count on me, Brick!" Whisker laughed, as he gave Brick a thumbs-up.

"Then I can go with Ani to the Fly course!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered towards Ani.

"...if that's the case, I'll show you two where the Power course is." Lock muttered, as he got on his feet. "Just tell me when you want to go."

While Ani walked off with Tails Doll behind her, and Whisker took off with Rudy and Striker, Brick looked to Jack. "Ready to go, Jack?" he asked.

"You bet!" Jack said with a smile.

"Come along, then." Lock muttered, as he began walking off, waiting for Brick and Jack to follow him.

As Brick and Jack followed, Brick stared at Lock while his thoughts wandered again to the past. He knew better than to bring it up out of the blue though, so he tried to think of a way to start up small talk.

"So, Lock...you're a bounty hunter? Sounds like an exciting job."

"Not really." Lock muttered with a shrug. "It gets fairly samey after a while."

"...what's with the outfit?" Jack asked, as he tilted his head.

"I don't want anyone to see my face." Lock replied, without bothering to glance at the two. "It's a lot easier to take down bigger bounties that way."

"Interesting," Brick said. "What are some of the bounties you've taken on?"

"Take a look." At that point, Lock tossed something at Brick, namely a list of wanted posters bundled together. On every single of the posters, however, a red stamp-mark reading "CAPTURED" was printed on.

"Woah..." Jack uttered, as he looked at the list. "How many posters are there here?"

"I'd estimate about thirty." Lock shrugged. "Of course, that list is only for those I captured alive."

"Gee, you certainly take your job seriously," Brick said, flipping through them. "That's impressive."

"Like I said, that's only for those I got alive." Lock began. "The list of those I brought in dead, on the other hand..."

Jack gulped, as he glanced at Lock. "...what about that list?"

"It's too heavy for me to carry around, these days." Lock replied quickly.

Brick's eyes were wide. "Wow..." He cleared his throat nervously while he handed back the list to Lock. "What about the ones you're currently on? You know...the ones that haven't been captured yet?"

"I only make lists of those I've captured." Lock muttered, as he tucked the list within his coat. "I memorize any bounties that haven't

been taken, and take them down whenever I get the chance."

"What are some of them?" Brick asked again. "Care to name a few of them?"

"No." Lock said in that same cold tone. "I don't give out information on bounties to anyone, even if they aren't bounty hunters."

"Why not?" Jack inquired.

"Isn't it obvious?" Lock said, as he glanced at Jack. "So that I can get the bounties without having someone else cross my line of fire."

"Ah, I see," Brick said, nodding. "That's smart..." then a scowl crossed his face. "...especially when you've got people like those Babylon Rogues around. I'm not talking about those two either...I'm talking about their grandfather and his team from a long time ago."

"...yeah. Them." Lock scoffed. "They got in the way of my own grandfather more than once."

"...what was your grandfather like?" Brick asked. He hoped he wasn't trailing onto a personal subject.

"...dunno. He died before I was born." Lock shrugged. "Died when my mother was just a few years old, too, so what I know of him, just about everyone who's heard of Sonic the Hedgehog already knows."

Brick felt a knot in his throat at that. "Do you...ever wonder how he died?"

"No. It distracts me from doing my job." Lock replied, as he closed his eyes. "I don't have time for distractions, you see."

"I see," Brick murmured.

"...why do you ask about it, anyway?" Lock eventually said, as he glanced at Brick. "You do remember what I told you earlier, about curiosity?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Brick said. "It's just that a friend of mine told me a lot of stories and makes me curious to know a little more from

other people."

"...you've known me for a grand total of ten minutes, and you're already asking me about my family." Lock said in a flat tone. "You do realize how creepy that sounds? I don't even know what your names are."

"Oh..." Brick scratched his head sheepishly. "...Well, my name's Brick Cainfield, Lock. Didn't mean to be so forward...someone else I know has a tendency to do that and well, she rubbed off on me..." Brick even blushed a little, having talked about Jill.

"My name's Jack the Lion, by the way!" Jack said with a brief bow.

"...hm." Lock scoffed, before looking ahead of him. "However she may have influenced you, you ought to be careful. You never know what kind of creeps could take advantage of something like that."

"...yeah," Brick murmured. "Right."

"So I apologize for sounding like a broken record, but be more careful, alright?" Lock said, as he let out a sigh. "Ugh... hopefully, one round around the course ought to get my mind off this..."

"Right, speaking of which, we should be close to it, right?" Brick asked.

"...just about." Lock nodded, as he pointed ahead of him. "There it is."

"Woah..." Jack uttered, as he glanced at what Lock was pointing at.

First of all, the racing course was huge. Once they got inside, they saw that the area was recreated as a rocky region, where the course ran inside a valley, and even through a waterfall in one place. In some places there were some barrels stationed for the Extreme Gear racers to run into, but for the Power-type gears they were knocked out of the way easily. Aside from barrels, there were actual boulders, probably for more experienced riders.

Essential for any Extreme Gear race course, there were ramps of different shapes and sizes leading riders in a leap over a large gap,

given the opportunity to pull off stunts and tricks. While this would be more suited for the Speed and Fly types, some Power-type riders actually liked to perform a flip or two.

"Wow, this isn't bad," Brick commented, clearly impressed.

"Appearences aren't everything." Lock noted, as he folded his arms. "You have to try it for yourself."

"...oh, I just realized!" Jack said, as he glanced at Lock. "Where's your Gear?"

"...on my back." Lock muttered, as he pointed at the large rifle on his back.

Brick gaped at the rifle. "...that's your Gear? How in the world do you ride it?"

"Let me show you." At that point, Lock hefted the rifle off his back, before placing it on the ground. "It might take a while..." As he spoke, he was folding the rifle together, until eventually, it took the form of a black and grey Extreme Gear, with what appeared to be an engine nozzle not only at the back, but at the front as well.

"...woah." Jack uttered, as he looked at Brick. "I don't think even the Professor could make a Gear like that!"

"I call her Lone Wolf." Lock said, as he lifted the Gear off the ground. "Shall we, then?"

"Sure thing," Brick said, taking off toward the entrance of the course.

"Hey, wait up, Brick!" Jack laughed, as he followed Brick.

Lock, too, followed the pair, but not before glancing behind him for a moment. Shrugging, he went towards the entrance as well.

Lock had quite the instinct to look back, because not too long after he left, Gale and Punk popped their heads out from behind a wall, watching them leave. "Nothing about Prower," Gale murmured. "But from the sound of it, the bull seems to like some sort of girl..."

"Yeah..." Punk nodded, as he scratched his beak. "Man, if only Lock wasn't around, we could corner someone... like that lion. He seems like an easy target."

"You know, the others split up towards the different courses," Gale said. "Maybe we could go after them. That wolf girl is with that doll in the Fly course, and that bear and kangaroo went with the pirate to the Speed courses."

"Hm..." Punk nodded, as he cracked his neck. "Well, that pirate could make things sour for us... so here's the plan. You go and get the wolf-girl, and I'll try to get that lion away from Lock. Not even someone like him can catch up with me."

"A Speed going on a Power course, eh?" Gale murmured in interest. "Pretty bold, brother, as always."

"Well, you know me, Gale." Punk chuckled, as he cracked his neck. "If I'm the best, then I can't back down from a challenge like this, can I?" As he spoke, he watched the three head for the course. "Just make sure to be discreet about it; we don't want to be noticed by anyone, do we?"

"Right," Gale said, taking her own gear into her hands; Type-G, which was as original as it got for a member of the Babylon Rouges.

"Alright, let's do it." Punk said, as he took his own gear at the ready; Type-P. "We'll meet up by the alley near the train station when we're done." Then, he began sneaking his way towards the Power course.

Gale waited until Punk was gone from sight, and then she turned her sights towards the Fly course. Luckily, her gear was a Fly type, and she knew the entire course inside and out, so she had an advantage. That wolf girl wouldn't know what would hit her.

With all his friends gone to Future City, Milo felt more alone in the Clubhouse than he ever was. Somehow it seemed that Natal disappeared and he couldn't find her, so he went up to Proxy. "Proxy...do you know where Natal went?" he asked.

Proxy glanced down at Milo, before sighing. "If I'm not mistaken, she's in her room... but she's locked the door, for some reason. She could have gone to sleep again..."

"Oh, okay," Milo said, with his ears drooping sadly. He didn't want to disturb Natal, but he didn't have anyone to talk to, and to be honest, Proxy wasn't the most social type. "...do you think we could go see the Professor?" he suddenly asked, perking up. "Maybe he'd like some company."

"...yeah, I think we could do that." Proxy nodded, as he rubbed Milo's head with a smile. "We'll just write a note saying where we are, in case Brick and the others come back before we do, and then I'll take us there. Sound good?"

Milo smiled. "That sounds good."

"Great." Proxy said, as he turned away and began walking down the hall. "You go ahead and write the note, Milo; there's a pen and paper in the kitchen. I'll take the Chaos Emerald, and wait outside."

Milo immediately headed into the kitchen and like Proxy said, there was a pen and paper. Milo wasn't the best writer though; from where he came from, he didn't really learn how to write. "Uh-oh..." He murmured when he realized this. "...well, maybe I can just bring it to Proxy so he can write it." He snatched a piece of paper from the pad and the pen, bringing it with him outside to where Proxy was.

"I just remembered that I don't really know how to write," Milo said, holding the paper and pen up to him. "Could you write it for me?"

"Of course." Proxy nodded, as he took the pen and paper, before writing something down on it. "...and there we go." he eventually said, as he looked at what he wrote. "Me and Milo have gone to the Professor, if you're wondering where we are. Signed, Proxy." Nodding, Proxy gave Milo a nod. "Just wait a bit..." he said, before warping out of sight.

Milo rocked back and forth on his feet, patiently awaiting Proxy.

Not long after, Proxy reappeared in front of Milo. "I placed the note

where they're bound to notice it. Ready to go, Milo?" he said.

"Yep, I'm ready," he said, smiling.

"Alright; let's go, then." Proxy said, as he placed a hand on Milo's shoulder. "Chaos Control!" Then, both of them warped away.

Cal awoke suddenly, since his mechanical devices detected a surge of Chaos energy. No, make that two-no, three. He wasn't startled though; somehow, he was much too relaxed to be so easily jumped. He figured Proxy might be going somewhere, so he had nothing to worry about.

He wondered what he got himself into though. This could get him into trouble if others found out, but no one necessarily needed to know about the sleeping Natal in his arms. Considering whether or not if things were going to go back to the way they were before everything with Callous happened, Cal was a bit concerned about what would happen between him and Natal. Surely Natal knew that they could be enemies again...yet she still tried to be closer to him.

It could very well be up to Metal Sonic to determine what would happen after Callous and Deity are out of the picture.

At that point, an all-too familiar ringing went off in Cal's head. *"Calculate, Metal Sonic here. How are you holding up?"*

That ring was irritating, but Cal kept his cool while he pressed his ear. *"I'm doing fine, surprisingly,"* he replied.

"Aah, glad to hear it." Metal responded. *"...heh. To think, that we would end up socializing with our enemies, to combat Callous and Novagod..."* he mused with a chuckle.

"...Tell me about it," Cal murmured, glancing down at Natal.

"...Calculate." At that point, Metal's voice grew terribly serious. *"I think I've found some method that could aid in vanquishing Novagod... but it could result in my body being overtaken by Corruption, or something worse than that."*

Cal grew pretty solemn too while hearing that. *"What is it?"*

"Basically, I'll try to merge Purity and Corruption into one force, using a Chaos Emerald as an anchor, so the two forces do not destroy one another." Metal replied. *"I have a feeling that if I can perfect it, it could create a force to be reckoned with, which could destroy Novagod."*

Cal blinked in amazement. *"I didn't know you could do that."*

"It's something I've thought of doing, ever since Callous introduced me to the two forces." Metal said. *"...but on the off-chance that I fail, and Corruption overtakes me... well, I wanted to impart one last command onto you."*

"And what command would that be?" Cal asked curiously.

"...if this whole thing with Callous, Novagod and Corruption ends with me destroyed... then I simply want you to live. I don't care what you decide to do with yourself... but just live. Do I make myself clear?"

"...affirmative," Cal replied.

"...good." Metal muttered. *"...well, I don't think I should take up too much of your time, so... take care, then."* Then, the line went dead.

Just like that? Cal was in disbelief at what Metal commanded him, but if it had gotten to a point where Metal considered that he would be destroyed in the process... "...he must really be that desperate to take them down..." he murmured to himself.

At that point, Natal snuggled in closer to Cal. "...mhm... who's desperate to take down who, now...?" she murmured drowsily.

Cal looked down at her. "It's nothing," he said. "Just thinking aloud..."

"...okay..." Natal uttered in response, hugging Cal tighter. "...you

were amazing."

Cal immediately started blushing bashfully. "Thanks," he muttered. "You were pretty good, yourself."

"Don't mention it." Natal replied with a giggle, as she buried her head into Cal's chest to hide the fact that she was blushing.

Cal could see it and he chuckled, deciding to take this opportunity to get payback for all the teasing she did to him. "Hey, Natal," he said. "You got some pink on you."

While the comment made her blush even more, Natal couldn't help but giggle even more at this. "And you have some red on you." she quipped back.

"Ah, touche," Cal chuckled, squeezing her in a hug.

Smiling, Natal returned the hug. "...the others probably won't be back for a while..." she muttered. "...do you wanna go for another round?"

That idea sounded so crazy to Cal that he blushed even more, turning completely red at the thought of it. "...are you willing?" he managed to utter.

"Hey, I suggested it, so I should be." Natal said, as she looked up at Cal. "What about you?"

Cal thought about it for a moment until he cracked a smirk. "I'm game," he said.

"Great." Natal said with a smile of her own, before she kissed Cal. Cal held her as they kissed, thinking just how strange Natal was, yet he was starting to like her more and more. As a plus, he secretly thought that Natal excelled Callous anyway, so he was happy to go again.

Jill told Silver the entire story in a nutshell; Metal's return, Shadow's death, Cal's betrayal, meeting Team Alpha, Callous' return, the

androids attacking, meeting the former GUN agents, and going over everything else that lead up to Jill going off to train with Metal, so that she could prepare for a battle against Callous. She also went over Deity Novagod; who he is, how he came to be and what he had to do with everything. She even told him that Deity had killed Sonic, Knuckles, and Fang.

The more Silver listened to, the more dumbfounded he was. It was so much information to take in, but he took it. He was amazed at what this girl went through, and what her friends went through as well. Jill told him about her friends in good details; Striker, Jack, Milo, Ani, and of course, Brick.

She told him so much that when she was finally done saying all she had, Silver was still trying to think about all the information that was coming at him.

"...I know it's a lot to take in," she said.

"...no kidding," the hedgehog uttered. "...I just can't believe it all happened...Angel Island disappearing...all of them dying.." He stood up and looked away shamefully. "...I wasn't there to stop it..."

"Silver?" Jill stood up as well. "No, please don't take it on yourself. It's not your fault..."

"She's right, you know." Metal muttered, as he was sitting a distance from the two, his legs crossed across each other. *"You can't blame yourself for events that you had no part in."* After saying that, he closed his eyes. *"If that was the case, then I'd have more blame on my shoulders than you,* Silver *."*

Silver looked at Metal for a minute until he turned away again. "If only I could go back and stop that Deity..."

"Silver, don't," Jill said. "You said so yourself; time is delicate. Besides, if you did somehow stop him, you'd change the future drastically."

"Yeah, so?" Silver said, looking back at her. "That's not news to me, you know."

"I know...but," Jill sighed. "...even if some horrible things happened, some good things happened too. Good things that I would never want to change..."

Metal was silent, as he glanced at Jill for a brief moment, before looking away. *...she's right... some good things did come out of this whole situation.* he thought. *...and I've really enjoyed those things.*

"...well, it's not like I can time travel at will anyway; I'd need a Chaos Emerald," Silver said. "But don't worry...I won't do that."

"Thank you," Jill said.

"...then I suppose that you'll be staying for a while." Metal mused, without looking at the two of them. *"Might as well make yourself comfortable; we still have some time before the fight."*

Silver rubbed his chin while thinking about something. "...you think I could possibly visit Tails and Charmy?" he asked. "Just for a few minutes. I think I want to see them again, and after I do, maybe I'll come back here."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea..." Metal muttered. *"We don't know if that could cause some form of paradox or not..."*

"...oh yeah, that's right," Silver murmured sheepishly. Then something else occurred to him. "Wait a minute, if that was true, then wouldn't a paradox have happened when I met you?"

"...point." Metal noted. *"But on the other hand, I'm a machine. Non-organic. Maybe that makes a difference?"*

"Who knows," Silver said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I still think your head might have exploded if a paradox happened."

"Even then, I don't want to test that theory by letting you visit the Professor or the Captain," Jill said nervously.

"Yes, let's play it safe, for now." Metal said, as he glanced at the green Chaos Emerald, which had been lying in front of him this entire time. *"We need to prepare, after all."*

Silver sat down quietly, and looked at Jill. "You said you could turn into another form?"

"Yes," Jill answered.

"Can I see it?"

Jill gave him a nod, and closed her eyes to concentrate. Soon after the delicate air arose around her, that cocoon of white light scooped her up and she transformed into her holy form again, with her pure white figure and her transparent green wings.

"Whoa..." Silver was blown away by it. She looked like an angel, and that wasn't intended in any mushy way, but it was the truth.

"Yes, it is impressive." Metal said, as he picked up the emerald, still looking at it. *...somehow, I think that it didn't work as planned because I was too focused on making it work...* he thought. *Maybe if I'm more relaxed while doing it...*

"...you know, if you're capable of turning into that," Silver told Jill, "then what's to say that Callous can't turn into something too?"

Jill's eyes popped open at that remark. That thought never came across her mind, and while she had never seen Callous turn into something yet, it sounded like a plausible idea.

Metal seemed to have heard it as well, as he tore his gaze from the emerald, glancing at Jill. *...if Callous could turn into something like that... damn. I didn't take that into account.* he thought.

"...you guys never thought about that?" Silver asked in disbelief.

"I never saw her do it, but there's no telling that its not possible," Jill uttered uneasily.

"...it still doesn't matter." Metal eventually said, as he looked away from them. *"If Callous can achieve a form like that, she'd still be outclassed by Jill's superior combat training. We can't let ourselves be distracted by small thoughts like that."*

A sharp jolt struck Metal's foot. *Is that so?* spoke Callous in his head.

Painful as it was, Metal acted completely indifferent on the outside, so he wouldn't draw suspicion to himself. *Yes, it is.* he responded. *I've told you countless times; you're not going to win. And you will uphold your end of the bet when you're defeated.*

Of course, I'm a girl of my word, she said. *But I'm still concentrating more on beating the crap out of her than what might happen if I SOMEHOW manage to lose...*

And Jill will be more focused on beating you than on what will happen if she SOMEHOW manages to lose. Metal quipped. *And before you decide to leave me alone for the day, let me just say this... trying to use me as a leverage to make her forfeit? Worst. Idea. Ever.*

Even then, it still has a good chance of working, Callous chuckled. *I'm not surprised you'd figure that out...but I'd like to see the anguish on her face when you squirm on the ground in your pain. You may not admit whether or not you care about her, Toaster, but you can't deny that she cares about you.* More pain dug into his foot then. *And that's what will make it priceless to watch.*

...even then... Metal thought, as he resisted the urge to yell out. ...it's not going to help you.

Really? Because I recall that she doesn't deal well with pressured situations, Callous said mockingly. *Oh well...toddle-loo.* With that, the pain was gone from Metal's foot.

Metal was silent, as he closed his eyes. ... TailsDoll *should have dealt with that problem...* he thought, before looking back down at the emerald. *For now... it's all about preparing Jill... and perfecting the formula.*

"...Metal?" Jill noticed that he was unusually silent again, and that didn't mean anything good.

"Yes?" Metal replied, still looking down at the emerald.

"Are you alright?" Jill asked again.

"...yes. I'm perfectly fine." Metal nodded. *"I was just thinking, is all..."* Then, he got on his feet. *"I'll head back to the cave, just so you know where I'm at."* he said, before he walked away from the scene.

Silver watched Metal leave. "...strange."

"I know," Jill murmured.

Metal overheard that, as he made a silent sigh. *It's getting harder and harder to keep it a secret... but I have to. If not... Jill can't focus on her training.*

"...be cool... and be collected..." Johnny hummed, as he looked at his hands, his back against a wall. "...gotta be ready..."

Bloom and Gloom walked up to him with curious looks. "What'cha doin?" Bloom asked.

"Psyching up." Johnny replied, as he opened and clenched his hands repeatedly, without looking at the butterflies. "I'm gonna try something, you see."

"What'cha gonna try?" Bloom asked again.

"You'll see." Johnny said, as he stepped away from the wall, clenching his hands into fists. "I feel ready to try it again." he added, before he walked towards a tombstone.

Bloom and Gloom both followed to eagerly see what he was about to do.

Alright... be cool. Be collected. Johnny thought, as he looked down at the tombstone, raising his right hand, before he closed his eyes. *...time to do this the right way.* At that point, Corruption covered his hand, as he placed it on the stone.

Bloom and Gloom watched closely.

...come on... Johnny thought, as he applied more Corruption to his arm. *Spirits, come out and play...*

...play? it was a child's voice, but it was a much different response than the one he had gotten from the previous spirit.

Somehow, the child's voice threw Johnny off, but not to the point where he was shocked, as his eyes still remained closed. *...yeah. Play.* Johnny thought. *What kinda games do you like to play?*

...I don't know... the voice spoke. *...I was never allowed to play...* A pale, transparent white figure slowly rose out of the tombstone. *...I was too sick to do anything...*

Without losing his cool, Johnny looked at the figure. *...disease...* he thought. *That's a shame. Don't you ever wish that you were allowed to play?*

I wished so much that I could play... The figure spoke, revealing a shriveled up face with empty eye sockets.

Looking at this husk, Johnny sighed. *...actually, I think you can play, now that you're like that.* he thought; he was formulating some form of scheme. *Think about it; you can play all you want, and no one can ever tell you that you can't play.*

Really? the ghost uttered, reaching to Johnny. The moment it touched Johnny, he would strangely begin to grow tired.

"Mhm..." Even with the sudden drowsiness over him, Johnny still kept his cool. *Yeah. I mean, once we can get off this hunk of rock... then there's millions of people you can play with. They may not see you... but you can have bucket loads of fun while playing with them.*

Even if they can't see me... the ghost was thinking it over, while Johnny grew all the more tired.

Even then, Johnny didn't break stride, as he kept looking at the ghost. *There's a world of possibilities away from this island... and I get the feeling that we'll be getting off it pretty soon...*

The ghost looked up at him, and while taking his hand, a small glow emitted from its hand which somehow made Johnny even more exhausted.

Bloom's eyes widened. "Johnny! Get away from it! It's sucking the life out of you!"

Now THAT gave the lion a start. "Son of a-!" he uttered, as he quickly let go of the tombstone, before backing away from the spirit. *Damn... lowered my guard there...* he thought, as he was catching his breath.

The instant Johnny moved away from the tombstone, the ghost gave out a shriek and shrunk back into the tombstone.

"...Th-that was a cl-close one..." Gloom said.

"...you're telling me..." Johnny uttered, as he rubbed his temples in an attempt to calm down. "Shit... I had the formula down, but I didn't know that these ghosts could suck the life outta me... and I almost had it, and everything..."

"That's pretty creepy," Bloom said. "Even I didn't know it until I saw what it was doing to you..."

"Ugh..." Groaning, Johnny sat down while taking a deep breath. "And if I'm not mistaken, just about every ghost in the vicinity can do that as well..." With a grunt, Johnny folded his arms. "Guess that's why they respect Deity so much... because they can't snuff his lights out."

"Maybe that's what he meant when he said that they had nothing to lose," Callous said, walking in to check on Johnny.

"...guess so." Johnny muttered, as he snapped his fingers with an annoyed scowl. "Damn... I didn't want to admit it... but I think Deity's right. I can't master this before I die again..."

"What do you mean?" Callous said. "Did he mention something about your death?"

"...he told me that it'd take "longer than I had left" to be able to

master that ghost thing." Johnny said grudgingly, as he lied down on the ground. "And after that little experience... if I did happen to master it, I'd probably have no time left at all."

"I see..." Callous murmured. "...I don't know how, but he's been able to not only read the deaths of the dead, but he can even foresee the deaths of the living. The only death he hasn't been able to see is his own..."

"...tsch." Johnny scoffed, as he closed his eyes "It'd be great to have powers like him, though... and practically be immortal. Thinking about all the chaos one could cause like that... man, it'd be the best thing..."

"Yeah, wishful thinking," Callous chuckled. Noticing Bloom and Gloom there, she turned to them. "Mind giving us a moment?"

"Yeah," Bloom grabbed Gloom and booked it out of there.

Once they were gone, Callous chuckled again. "The upside that he can't see his own death is that he'll never know what's coming. Once we get rid of him, you can have all the time in the world to brush up on your Corruption."

"Once we get rid of him..." Johnny reminded, as he sat up again. "First, we need to deal with Jill... and then, get off the island... and the rest'll be history."

"Yep." Callous knelt down and crawled to Johnny until they were face to face, smirking at him. "All it is, is a matter of effort."

"And I bet that a lot of effort is gonna go into this." Johnny said, smirking at Callous as well.

"That could mean a lot of things, you know," she chuckled, giving him a kiss.

"Well, I'll make sure to figure out what it means at a later time." Johnny quipped, as he kissed Callous back.

Callous took him and began kissing him deeper. It didn't take long for Johhny to grab hold of Callous and kiss her fiercly and forcefully,

and one could swear that if not for self-restraint, he was actually trying to rip Callous' clothes apart, with the force he removed them with. With Johnny being so rough, Callous was overwhelmed with lust as she tore her clothes from her own body, allowing Johnny free reign. When her clothes were removed, Johnny quickly pushed Callous against one of the tombstones, still kissing her with great intensity. Callous clawed Johnny's back as they made out with impatient agony.

After a short while, Johnny broke away, as he grinned. "You know... I'm starting to see a pattern forming." he chuckled, before kissing Callous again, with even more force than before.

"Really? I don't see it," Callous mused, jokingly of course. Then she came back for the same intense make out.

Chapter 60

CHAPTER – SIXTY

"Woohooooo!" Crashing through the waterfall, Brick raced through the course on his Extreme Gear.

"Wheeeeee!" Jack cheered, as he was following Brick on the same path, just crashing through the waterfall as well.

Lock also came crashing through the waterfall, but unlike the other two, he was silent, making sure to keep his hat firmly on his head, as he followed Brick and Jack.

Making a turn, Brick encountered some of the barrels. It was no problem for him to knock them out of the way, since he built in a pair of horns on the gear, like the ones on his head. "Look out for the barrels!" he called back, mainly to Jack since Lock likely raced this track before.

"Okay!" Jack called back, as the barrels came rolling towards him. While he was focused on avoiding them, his Gear was outfitted with a mane-like plow on the front, which smashed apart any barrel that got in his way. However, one barrel actually bounced off a rock on the path, threatening to knock Jack off his Gear.

Before it could, however, something crashed into the barrel, which caused it to blow up right there and then. Blinking, Jack glanced behind him, to see Lock leaping right over him, the front engine nuzzle on his Gear having smoke come out of it, as if something had been shot out of it.

"Nice going Lock!" Brick called. "Who made that gear anyway?"

"I did most of the work, but my father helped me with the more complicated parts." Lock answered, as he rode next to Brick, still holding his hat in place. "It was his idea to have it turn from a Gear into a rifle."

"That's so cool!" Jack laughed, as he was lagging after the two. "So the thing on the front is a cannon?"

"It's either that..." At that point, the front nuzzle flared up, which began slowing down Lock, so that Jack could pass by him. "...or this."

"Ah, brakes," Brick mused. "That's convenient!"

"Not only that..." Lock began, as the front nuzzle stopped, allowing him catch up to them. "...but it allows me to change direction instantly. Very convenient for chasing high bounties."

"Nice," Brick was really impressed, but he was also curious how they could make a gear like that. While he would ask about Lock's father, he remembered what Lock warned him, so he kept quiet, while he charged ahead. Throughout a loopy turn, they encountered some boulders. "Incoming!" he called, breaking straight through one of them to continue on.

"Stand back." Lock told Jack, as he went a bit ahead of Jack, before several blasts of energy shot out from the front nuzzle, blasting apart any boulders that got in their way.

"...that is too awesome!" Jack said in utter awe, as he watched Lock make quick work of the boulders.

Brick meanwhile was coming up to a ramp, and the minute he leaped off of it, he spun around in the air to perform a few stunts. He was amazed at the sights he saw though, while being so high up in the air. He saw nearly the entire track and a little beyond it.

Soon, both Jack and Lock flew right off the ramp as well, though neither of them did any fancy stunts in mid-air. "Hey, Lock!" Jack called. "Isn't it kinda hard to ride while you're holding your hat on your head?"

"Can't say that it is, no." Lock shrugged.

When Brick landed on the other side, he took a boost ahead. Riding on this course was more exhilarating than the Mystic Ruins, but he wasn't too caught up in the excitement. He suddenly spied ahead

that one of the walls had a small crack in it. "Hm?" It might have been crazy, but Brick headed straight for that crack in the wall.

"Wha- Brick! Don't-" Jack called, but Lock simply raised his hand, silencing Jack. "What-"

"He seems to know what he's doing." Lock said, as he actually sped after Brick. "There's a different path you can take to the left."

"...okay..." Jack nodded, as he took off towards the left, leaving Brick and Lock to rush towards the wall.

Sure enough, Brick broke through the wall and it revealed a secret passageway. He grinned proudly as he sped through the passageway, wondering where it would take him.

Likewise, Lock sped right after Brick, as he glanced behind him once more, before focusing on the path ahead of him.

In the meantime, Jack was taking a higher route, which went around the wall, rather than through it. "I hope Brick doesn't get hurt..." he muttered, as he kept riding the path. Unbeknownst to him, however, someone else had started to trail him...

"Hey, where's Jack?" Brick called back, when he saw that Lock was the only one that followed him.

"He took a different path." Lock replied, as he glanced behind him again. "He probably thought that we couldn't get through the wall."

"I guess we can't blame him," Brick said, continuing on.

Still on his own, Jack eventually began hearing a second Gear behind him. "...who's there?" he uttered, as he glanced behind him.

"Surprise!" Before Jack could properly react, Punk suddenly grabbed hold of the lion's arms, trying to pull him off his Extreme Gear. "You're coming with me!"

"Aah- hey, let go of me!" Jack yelled, as he tried yanking out of Punk's grip, still trying to keep his balance.

"As if I would do that! You've got answers that I'm interested in!" Punk reiterated.

Reaching the end of the passageway, Brick and Lock emerged back onto the track, but they were much too far away to hear or see what was going on with Jack.

"I said, let go!" Finally, Jack managed to get one arm out of Punk's grip, before he quickly got out his harmonica.

"Aw, you gonna play a song for me?" Punk chuckled. "Go on; entertain me!"

"If you insist!" At that point, Jack put the instrument to his lips and played, creating a massive soundwave that forced Punk to let go of him.

Hearing that sound, Lock looked behind him. *...what was that?* Thinking that, his front nuzzle flared up, as he slowed down.

Brick heard it too. "Jack doesn't bring out his harmonica unless..." then it hit him. "We have to go back for him!" Brick sputtered, taking a U-turn back for Jack's direction.

Instead of taking a U-turn, the hind nuzzle on Lock's Gear died out, making him change direction, letting him follow Brick without turning his gear around.

"AAAGH!" Punk cried, as he glared at Jack, who was still playing the harmonica. "That's enough!" he said, as he shot his hand out, grabbing Jack's throat.

That got Jack to stop playing, as he choked for his breath, glaring at Punk. *...I... can't play the harmonica like this! How am I gonna get away from him now?* he thought.

"Let him go you stupid parakeet!"

Even if Brick wasn't wearing his nose ring, he still had it in his hands. It conjured up red Chaos Energy that surrounded himself, and he charged madly at Punk, ramming him and his gear away from Jack.

"PAH!" Being knocked away like that, Punk glared at Brick. "Son of a-"

"Mind your language." Before Punk could finish his sentence, an energy blast sailed over him, and he saw Lock heading towards them.

"Tsch... this ain't over!" Growling, Punk spun around and sped off, leaving the three on their own.

"...wow... that was a close one..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Brick and Lock. "Thanks, guys!"

"You alright there, Jack?" Brick asked, as the Chaos Energy shriveled away from him.

"...yeah..." Jack nodded, as he held his throat. "Still, what did he want with me?"

"...what did he tell you?" Lock uttered, as he glanced at Jack.

"...he said something about answers..." Jack muttered.

"...hm. Excuse me." Lock said, as he began speeding off after Punk. "You two just keep racing; leave him to me."

Brick figured that Lock could very well handle it, so he motioned for Jack to follow. "C'mon, we don't want to hold up the track now," he said, starting off. "We can wait for Lock at the finish line."

"...yeah." Jack nodded, as he began following Brick.

Meanwhile, at the Fly course...

"C'mon Tails Doll, you're losing me!" Ani laughed, whizzing through the course on Soaring Moon. It didn't take long at all for Ani to get the hang of it, and she found that she was actually very good on Extreme Gear. She LOVED flying through the Air Rings with telekinesis, and that kind of speed was enough to hype up the little pup.

" *Wait up, Ani!"* Tails Doll called, as he was flying after Ani as fast as

he could. Admittedly, he could fly right past her if he wanted to, but that wouldn't be fair, in his eyes.

She continued to laugh while she launched up into the air with a ramp, and thanks to telekinesis, she lagged in the air while performing an amazing number of stunts. Once landing, her score was printed on a billboard beside the track, which ensued a loud cheer from an audience that apparently gathered by the track to watch her.

"Thank you!" she called, holding up peace fingers.

"Ani, you were awesome!" Tails Doll said with a laugh, as he followed Ani as best he could, fluttering around her.

"You really think so?" Ani asked with glittering eyes.

"Yeah, totally!" Tails Doll said happily. *"You're much better at Extreme Gear than I am at flying, that's for sure!"*

Ani grinned, while she sped ahead. "Thanks, Tails Doll!"

Meanwhile, someone else had been watching them from afar while following them on the track. "She's really stirring up the crowd," she grumbled, turning out to be Gale. She snorted, "Beginners luck..."

In reality, she was jealous, but she wouldn't dare admit to herself or to anyone else that. Up ahead, she saw a ramp leading up to more Air Rings, which took a ledge above the course. "Hm...that gives me an idea..."

Ani took the course underneath the ledge, while Gale was sneaky going up the ramp through the Air Rings, landing on the second floor. "Lets see if I can cut you off..." she murmured.

"Wow, this place is dark!" Ani commented.

"Not a problem!" Tails Doll said, as his gem began glowing, creating some light for the two to see where they were going. "Just tell me if it's too bright or not bright enough!"

"That's good!" Ani said, noticing that they had made their way into a tunnel. "Wow, this place is cool!"

Above, Gale was dodging incoming stalagmites that were on the ground. This Fly course was recreated as the caverns, and while Ani had gone into the caverns themselves, Gale was following on the outside.

"It's really big, too!" Tails Doll said, as he looked around him. *"I wonder if the other courses are like this, too!"*

"I hope so!" Ani said. Finally they could see the end of the tunnel and the minute they popped out of the tunnel, Gale saw them. She went up the ramp from the second floor, and dove down after Ani, using a move that her grandfather, Jet, taught her once. By using some of her fuel, she created a tornado as she flew down at the wolf.

She would've gotten her two had it been not for one factor.

Ani sensed her coming. The wolf quickly took a sharp turn, taking Tails Doll by the hand and she raced around Gale when she landed, who was in disbelief. "Wha?"

"You again?" Ani yelled, seeing Gale.

"A bad guy *!"* Tails Doll uttered, as he looked from Ani to Gale. *"You have got to be... Ani! Cover your face! I can deal with her!"*

"No, Tails Doll, you don't have to do that," Ani said. Then she glared at Gale. "What do you want?"

"I want to ask you a few questions," Gale said.

"And you figured it was necessary to try and jump us rather than confront us with them?" Ani said.

"You wouldn't answer them just like that after the way we treated you guys," Gale reasoned.

"...good point," Ani agreed.

Looking from Ani to Gale again, Tails Doll was a bit uneasy. *"...what kind of questions?"* Tails Doll uttered.

"Not in the open," Gale said, waving a finger. "You can come with me."

"Nuh-uh, no way," Ani said. "If you want those answers, you'll have to say them now...or race me for them." Ani wanted to try her luck with a professional, and see where she was in skill. "If you win, then I'll come with you to answer what questions you have."

Gale actually began thinking about it.

"...Ani, are you sure about that?" Tails Doll whispered, as he fluttered close to Ani. *"I mean... they're descended from the* Babylon Rogues *, and even Daddy and Big* Bro *thought that they were really bad when it came to cheating..."*

Just to make sure Gale didn't hear her, Ani hid her mouth behind a hand while talking to Tails Doll. "I'll be alright. Even if she does cheat, I have something that she doesn't, and that's super powers."

"I'll take you up on your offer, then," Gale said. "We race this track, and winner decides it."

Ani grinned at Gale. "Better get ready to be creamed!"

"That's only beginner talk," Gale chuckled. "But we'll see who's the loser."

"The loser's gonna be you!" Tails Doll said, as he latched onto Ani's head, glancing at Gale. *"Let's race!"*

The moment Tails Doll said that, both competitors took off with a boost, rushing through the course intensely. Ani was laid back and carefree, whirling around the obstacles with ease while Gale became intently focused.

What's with this kid? Gale thought, watching Ani.

Still keeping an eye on Gale, Tails Doll tilted his head. *I know you've got something planned, but if you try hurting Ani, I'll show you!* he

thought.

For awhile, they were racing in silence through the obstacles, but then it came to a massive ramp. They both took off, and Gale was quick to show off some of her stunts. Ani couldn't afford to show off with telekinesis, so she hurried some of her tricks before they landed. According to the billboard, they got the same score.

"Woo!" Ani cheered, seeing this.

Gale growled as they turned a sharp corner, and entered into the caves. She didn't have to worry about seeing, because Gale memorized this course by heart.

Ani, in the meantime, hoped that Tails Doll's light would be enough to like up the dark. Thankfully, it did just that, providing just enough light for Ani to properly navigate through the dark caves.

So much for trying to lose her in the caves, Gale thought. Even then, she rushed at Ani to use a boost to attack her.

Unfortunately for Gale, Ani knew she was coming and was prepared. Instead of hitting Ani, Gale bounced off a barrier of telekinetic energy that was surrounding her. Moving away, Gale was shocked. "What in the world?"

Ani laughed at her tauntingly, "Ha-ha!" while she took off ahead of Gale, since the rebound had slowed her down.

Gale gritted her teeth as she took off following her.

"Nice one, Ani!" Tails Doll laughed, as he glanced back at Gale, his gem still lighting the way for Ani. *"I'll keep an eye on her; focus on the road!"*

"...now she's just bringing up even more questions I'd like to ask her," Gale murmured, while Ani kept on ahead. "I've never seen anyone with abilities like that before..." Gale saw the cave splitting up in two different directions. She knew that one was quicker than the other, and she knew which one it was too. Ani happened to take the one that wasn't it, so Gale smirked. "Now I ought to catch up the

time I lost," she chuckled, taking the other path.

Meanwhile, Ani took off as quick as she could. "Is she still there Tails Doll?" she asked.

"She took the other way, Ani!" Tails Doll said, as he looked down at Ani. *"But we can't stop here; just give it all we've got!"*

"Right!" Ani said, taking another boost ahead.

Gale had already exited out of the caves and was taking a path up a ledge above the other way, where Ani would eventually come out of. She already saw Gale up ahead. "Hey! How did she get ahead?" Ani yelled.

Gale smirked as she went up the ramp at the end of her ledge, dropping down to the last part of the course that would lead to the finish line.

Ani hurried up her own ramp, flipping down to the last part just in time to see Gale heading toward the finish line. "No!"

"This is bad! At this rate, she's gonna win!" Tails Doll yelled, as he could only watch Gale speed towards the goal...

...but before she would reach it, something suddenly exploded right in front of Gale. "WHOA!" Gale didn't see it coming and she flipped over onto her face, stopping her completely.

Ani used her telekinesis to brake to a stop without having to get off her gear, wondering what just happened.

"...what was that?" Tails Doll uttered, as he glanced at where Gale had been thrown off.

At that point, several explosions erupted all around them, though now, it became clear what the source of these explosions were; energy blasts, coming from ahead of them. Soon, it became completely obvious what was causing this; namely, two Extreme Gear riders coming at them from the opposite direction.

In other words, Punk was being chased by Lock, who was firing a hail of energy blasts from his Extreme Gear. "For crying out loud, do you ever give up?" Punk yelled, as he glanced back at Lock, who still kept firing at Punk, who was having a pretty hard time avoiding all these shots.

"Look! It's that Lock guy, Tails Doll," Ani said with a point at them.

Gale shot up and tried to get back on her gear. *I can still win the race!* she thought, slowly starting up after the finish line again.

"Gale, what are ya doing?" Punk cried out, as he looked towards his sister. "We've gotta get away from Lock, before he blasts us into smithereens!" Of course, as he called this, Lock was still firing at him.

"Ani, hurry up! We can beat her!" Tails Doll said, as he gave Ani a nod. *"Give us a super-boost!"*

"Yeah!" Ani moved her hands around to conduct more telekinetic energy, and while she was charging up a super boost in the thrusters behind her gear, too. Letting it go, she shot forward like a bullet. "YAHOOOO!"

...and while zipping right past Gale, she crossed the finish line just in time before her.

Gale was knocked off her gear again in the sheer force of Ani's telekinesis. Landing on her back, she gawked at Ani in shock while the husky wolf jumped off her gear and danced around in victory.

"I win!" Ani cheered.

"Yeah, you did it!" Tails Doll cheered, until he noticed Punk headed towards them. *"Uh oh, more trouble!"*

"Perfect shot... just gotta grab her, and..." Punk muttered, as he got ready to drive past Ani and grab her. At that point, however, one of Lock's shots traveled underneath Punk's gear, promptly propelling him off it, right over Ani, even as he tried grabbing her.

When he came to a stop, Punk shook his head woozily, as he got on

his feet... only to realize that he had grabbed Tails Doll. "...what?"

"Let go!" And then, Tails Doll promptly let out a light-blue cloud of gas in Punk's face, forcing him to let go, as Tails Doll fluttered back to Ani.

"The hell was that a-CHOO!" Without any provocation, Punk began furiously and repeatedly sneezing, much to his bewilderment. "What the f-ACHOO! What's going on? Why am I snee-CHOO!"

Ani fell onto her back and rolled around laughing hysterically. "You made him sneeze, Tails Doll? AHAHAHAHA!"

"I'll show you!" Gale snarled, reaching for Ani.

"Uh-oh." Ani was quick to snare Gale with telekinesis, stopping her.

Gale tried to struggle, only to find she couldn't break free. "What the hell are you?" Gale screamed, trying to grab for Ani who was still outside of her reach.

"Alright, this is starting to p-ACHOO!" Punk uttered, as he glared at Ani. "For f-ACHOO! I swear, I'm gonna-"

"Hey." At that point, Lock stopped in front of Ani, glaring at both Punk and Gale. "Both of you, get lost." As he spoke, he lifted the brim of his hat up enough for the two hawks to be able to see his eyes; a pair of cold, unfeeling and genuinely terrifying eyes that almost looked like they were looking directly at their souls. "Now."

Gale was terrified, and once Ani released her, she grabbed Punk. "Let's get out of here!"

"You don't need to tell me twice!" Punk yelled, as he grabbed Gale as well, before bolting it away from the scene.

"...wow..." Tails Doll uttered, as he looked at Lock. *"...um... thanks, Mr. Lock!"*

Ani finished up laughing, wiping away a tear. "Those guys are almost as funny as Dr. Eggman was..." she mumbled. "Uh..." then she realized Tails Doll was right there. "No offense Tails Doll."

"None taken!" Tails Doll said, just as he noticed that Lock was now looking at them. *"...um..."*

"...you're alright?" Lock asked, as he lowered his hat over his eyes again.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Ani said. "Thanks again Lock."

"...you're welcome." Lock nodded, as he glanced around him. "...but I think you should meet with your friends again. Those Rogues seem to have an interest in you, now."

"Interest?" Tails Doll inquired, as he tilted his head. *"You mean those questions that girl-hawk wanted to ask Ani?"*

"Just get with your friends again." Lock said, as he began speeding off. "And... sorry for interrupting your race."

Ani got back on her gear with one last look at Lock, before he sped away. "That's kinda strange if you ask me," she said. "I wonder why those two were trying so hard to get answers and why Lock is keeping them from asking their questions."

"We should ask Brick about it when we get to him." Tails Doll noted, as he glanced behind him, just catching a glimpse of Lock before he fully vanished. "...I do wonder what's up with Lock, though. He looks scary... but he doesn't seem too bad..."

"Well, he's still pretty cool," Ani said, racing away. "After all, you can't judge a book by its cover."

Once Gale and Punk got far enough away, they stopped to catch their breath.

"This is*huff*crazy!" Gale complained.

"I completely a-CHOO!" Punk said, as he held his face in disbelief. "I have no idea what the hell that doll sprayed me with, but it's getting ridiculo-CHOO!"

"Here," Gale threw him a handkerchief. "Blow your nose until you get it out of your system." Then she threw her back against the wall,

groaning. "It's not just that stupid doll, it was that girl! She had freakin' super powers, Punk!"

Blowing his nose, Punk looked at Gale in disbelief. "Are you serious? ACHOO!" Groaning, he blew his nose again. "Ugh... and can you believe it? The lion's harmonica is some kinda sonic weapon! Nearly blew my eardrums o-CHOO!"

"Seriously?" Gale questioned.

"Yeah, seriously! Who the hell makes instruments like that, anywa-CHOO!" Punk uttered, before blowing his nose once more.

"Who knows..." Gale grumbled. "...but they're a crowd that just brings up even more questions."

"Tsch... but with Lock in town, I don't think we'll get any answers..." Punk muttered, as he blew his nose. "Finally... thought it'd never stop."

"Chances are, if we go after the bear, kangaroo and pirate, I'm betting they have some crazy super power too," Gale said. "So...any other ideas?"

"..none at the moment. I'm all burnt out." Punk growled, as he sat down. "Tsch... this just pisses me off."

"...Maybe we could get Grandpa to give us some ideas?" Gale suggested, rubbing her beak.

"Maybe..." Punk muttered, as he got on his feet, folding his arms. "But first, let's get some grub. This whole thing's starved me out." And then... "ACHOO!"

"So everyone else is in Future City trying out their Extreme Gears, while Natal and Cal are back at the Clubhouse. Natal was taking a nap, but Cal was very quiet recently and I didn't know where he was," Milo told Tails, while they sat outside on the porch of the shop. Milo was eating a sandwich while he talked, making sure to swallow before he spoke.

"Ah, I see..." Tails nodded, as he was drinking a cup of tea. "I do hope that Brick and the kids don't end up in trouble over there..."

"I don't think that'd be an issue to worry about, Tails." Proxy said, as he was standing with his back against the wall, watching the two. "Brick can take care of them, and I doubt that either Whisker or Tails Doll would let any of the kids out of their sights."

"Yeah, but even if I didn't want to go, I felt kinda lonely," Milo said. "That's why I wanted to come visit you."

"That's fine, Milo." Tails said, as he gave Milo a smile. "Just remember, you're all welcome here whenever you wish to."

"I'm glad to know that Professor," Milo said, smiling back. Then he remembered, "Oh, by the way, Ani's back."

"Is she?" Tails uttered, as he looked at Milo in surprise. "...is she-"

"She's fine." Proxy said with a nod. "She's the same, perky Ani as always."

"...that's good to hear." Tails said, as he sighed in relief.

"What was wrong with Ani though?" Milo asked. "I was never told anything, and Ani left with the others before I got to hear the story."

"...well..." Tails began, as he scratched his neck. "You remember that Callous attacked Ani, but Wiper managed to get her to Jill in time, right?" As he spoke, he closed his eyes. "Well... somehow, Callous' attack got to Ani, and the Corruption in her body had, according to Sage, transformed her subconscious self into... a monster."

"A monster?" Proxy noted, as he glanced at Tails.

"Both Jill and Sage were supposed to try and cure Ani of it, to ensure that she didn't turn into that monster if she woke up... but Jill left to train before we came back here, so I guess Sage must have fixed it on her own."

"...what kind of monster?" Milo asked, curious and a little uneasy at

the same time.

"...I think Sage described it as... a werewolf." Tails noted, as he glanced at Milo.

"...a werewolf..." Milo shuddered a bit when he thought about it, and decided not to think about it. "...How does Corruption do that, Professor?" he asked.

"...I don't know." Tails admitted, as he let out a sigh. "It's hard to even think about what properties these two forces have; Purity and Corruption. It's hard enough to fully understand Chaos Energy..."

"...I have to admit, even I'm puzzled by what the two forces can do." Proxy noted, as he glanced at his own hand. Admittedly, he hadn't used his Corruption abilities since he saved Hunter from Callous, but he still felt its presence in his body.

"I hope Jill can stop Callous," Milo murmured.

"...she will." Proxy said calmly, as he clenched his hands into fists. "Callous can't hope to beat Jill in the long run. And even though it's kind of ironic to be saying this... Metal Sonic's training her."

"Even though he is our enemy..." Tails mused, as he closed his eyes. "...Metal is probably the only one who can train Jill beyond what she's taught herself. Though, I still wonder why he's willing to help her..."

"Brick thinks it's more than just teaching Callous that she can't take Metal's place at being the bad guy," Milo said. "But Brick doesn't know what else it could be."

"...it is strange..." Tails muttered. "Metal always used to be completely dedicated to his job, never once questioning Eggman's orders... well, except during the Metal Overlord incident... so why..."

"...the Metal Overlord incident..." Proxy muttered, as he blinked. "Wait... Tails, you don't suppose something similar to that incident could be happening again?"

Blinking, Tails glanced at Proxy. "...how did you..."

"Well, Eggman specifically built the Shadow Androids during that incident, so I remember the basics. Maybe the data of Chaos is tampering with his initial programming?"

"...what would that mean?" Milo asked, not understanding.

"Well, during the original Metal Overlord incident, the data of Chaos ended up severely corrupting Metal's programming, which led to him betraying Eggman." Tails said, as he glanced at Proxy. "But... Eggman ensured that there would be no way of Metal betraying him when he tried doing the same thing again.

"Maybe that's it." Proxy said. "Since Eggman no longer is on this earth, Metal's programming is being corrupted again... but instead of making him turn on his creator, it's making his mind less like a machine..." As he spoke, he glanced at Tails and Milo. "...and more like a human."

"...does that mean that he could hurt Jill?" Milo asked worriedly.

"...it depends." Proxy said, as he closed his eyes. "But right now... I can only guess that the Metal Sonic who's training Jill, is not the same Metal Sonic who killed Shadow."

"So, you're saying that Metal's changing...like Cal?" Milo supposed.

"...I suppose I am." Proxy nodded, as he closed his eyes. "...but if he'll end up becoming better or worse than before, I don't know."

"...maybe around Jill, he'll become better," Milo said. "Jill's really nice...and I don't think anyone could be bad to her when they get to know her."

"We'll just have to wait and see..." Tails said, as he sighed. "...things sure have gotten wild now, compared to back in the day..."

"Egh..." her stomach was twisting again, so Jill and Silver were on their way back to the caves. She was in her normal form again.

"How'd you get sick anyway?" Silver asked, watching her hold her

stomach.

"I didn't get sick," Jill tried to explain. "I feel this way because Callous is...egh...she's doing something that's bad enough to make me feel sick to my stomach. We're connected, so whatever one feels, the other tends to feel the opposite." Her tongue hung out in disgust. "...and believe me, of all the things Callous could do, you don't want to know what she's doing right now..."

Silver raised an eyebrow as he stared at Jill, even when they got to the caves.

Once there, they'd see Metal sitting there, just looking at the Chaos Emerald in complete silence.

While Silver helped Jill sit down next to the wall, he directed a gaze at the Metallix. "So, why are you just staring at that Chaos Emerald?" he asked. "I thought you were going to try and experiment again."

"I am going to do that." Metal said, as he glanced at Jill. *"...Callous again, huh? Hrm... I was going to ask you something, but it can wait until you get better..."*

"...go ahead," Jill mumbled. "I can deal with it..."

"Alright..." Metal muttered, as he tilted his head. *"...can you play instruments?"*

Jill blinked blankly at that random question. "...I can play a few things," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was..." Metal began, as he scratched his neck. *"...wondering if you could play a calm melody, to help me relax. I think that's a contributing factor to getting this experiment right. And seeing as how you're embarrassed about singing..."*

Jill understood the logic in it, but she was still a little surprised that Metal asked that of her. "...something calm..." she murmured, thinking about the different instruments she could play and which one would fit that. So she opened up her hands, and a white glow brought out her sword, but after the moment it was seen, it began to

morph into something else. Silver watched in amazement as her sword formed into a U-shaped object, possessing numerous golden strings.

It had turned into a hand-held harp.

"...impressive." Metal noted, as he gave Jill a nod. *"Go ahead and start playing."*

Jill brainstormed a song to play, while needlessly plucking the strings, until a melody began to form. "Well...the song I'm thinking of is one that needs me to sing," she said. "But I'm willing to put aside my shyness..."

"...good." Metal nodded, as he held up the Chaos Emerald. *"Ready when you are."* he said, as he closed his eyes, whilst Purity and Corruption covered his arms once more.

Jill closed her eyes while she began playing the intro on the harp, which made Silver pay attention. Then she took a deep breath.

"I wish I was in Carrickfergus

Only for nights in Ballygrand

I would swim over the deepest ocean

The deepest ocean for my love to find."

Listening to the song, Metal felt some form of inner peace, as his arms were applying Purity and Corrruption to the Chaos Emerald. The energies swirled around the Chaos Emeralds like before, but the changed factor was Metal's calmness, which actually began to have an effect.

"But the sea is wide and I cannot swim over

Neither have I wings to fly

If I could find me a handsome boatman

To ferry me over to my love and die."

She's a pretty good singer, Silver thought.

While he wanted to see just what sort of effect this had on the emerald, Metal allowed himself to stay relaxed, listening to the song as he continued his experiment.

Jill was a little nervous at first, but she too started to relax while she moved onto the next verses.

"My childhood days bring back sad reflections

Of happy times spent so long ago

My childhood friends and my own relations

Have all passed on now like melting snow."

"But I'll spend my days in endless roaming

Soft is the grass, my bed is free."

The energies around the Chaos Emerald even seemed to be listening, while they got tangled up with Chaos Energy.

"Ah, to be back now in Carrickfergus

On that long road down to the sea."

"I'll spend my days in endless roaming

Soft is the grass, my bed is free."

At this point, Metal was absolutely immersed in Jill's song, to the point where his mind began drifting away. Even then, he still kept a steady flow of Purity and Corruption going into the emerald.

"But I am sick now, and my days are numbered

Come all you young men and lay me down."

By the time Jill finished, she had opened her eyes and noticed that

the energies around the Chaos Emerald had turned into a dark green color, but they were calmly circling around the Chaos Emerald without a single disturbance. Even if she was surprised, she still kept playing the harp.

Still, Metal didn't open his eyes, as he kept applying the energies to the Chaos Emeralds.

While Jill kept playing the harp, Silver scooted over and whispered to her. "Wow, I've never seen Metal Sonic that calm before."

"...I have," she whispered back. "More than once." Seeing Metal this calm somehow warmed her heart a little. She still wished she could figure out what Metal could do with himself as an alternative to conquering the world, but seeing this gave her some hope...and even made her a little happy seeing Metal so content.

...this feeling... Metal thought, his mind still completely at peace. *...somehow... it feels... good.* As he thought this, still, the flow of energies into the emerald didn't cease.

Jill smiled. "Metal, you did it," she said.

Hearing that, Metal opened his eyes. *"...I did?"* he uttered, as he looked down at the emerald, seeing the dark green energy swirling around it. *"...wow."*

"Look at that," Silver murmured. "...I just hope this doesn't cause any side effects, like ripping me out of one time period to another."

"Silver," Jill shot a stern, warning look at him.

"Incredible..." Metal muttered, as he kept looking at the energy. *"...but how does this type of energy work? I'd try testing it out, but... I'm a bit worried that if I move my arms away, it will fade..."*

"Here, let me try," Jill said, getting up. Slowly, she stuck her hand toward the energies to feel them. When she felt them, she kept her hand in the flow, trying not to alter it at all. "...strange..." Jill murmured. "...It doesn't feel warm like Purity, but it's not painful like Corruption...it feels a little cold." It felt cool like a coastal breeze in fact, but it was a soothing cold, since Jill let her fingers tangle up in

the energies.

"...cold..." Metal mused, as he kept looking at the energy. *"...a true fusion between Purity and Corruption... what would it be called, pray tell?"*

Jill stared at the energies for a long time. "...I don't know if it'll sound too cliché...but maybe, Unity?" she suggested at one point.

"...Unity..." Metal hummed, before chuckling. *"Yes, it does sound pretty cliché... but in a good way. I think we'll stick to that name for now."*

"Sounds good," Jill said, pulling her hands away. "I know I can't wield it though. Even if it has Purity, trying to control Corruption is outside of my field..."

"...then I suppose it falls to me, then." Metal said, as he glanced at Jill. *"But the question that remains, however... how do I keep the energy from fading away?"*

"Maybe you don't have to worry about it fading away?" Silver guessed. "I mean, if you were successful in creating it, chances are that you can recreate it again."

"That might be true," Jill said, *"but what if the next time Metal needs it is in a tough situation? It's had to be that calm under pressure."*

"...I don't know," Silver admitted, sighing. "All this stuff is still beyond me anyway..."

"...I'll figure something out." Metal shrugged, as he stood up. *"But for now... I think it's time to test out the properties of Unity. Wouldn't you agree, Jill?"*

"Yeah, but on what?" Jill asked.

Chaos walked by from the inside of the caves, and the minute his bulgy green eyes laid on them, the creature stopped dead in its tracks. It stared in wonder at the Unity energies Metal was wielding in his hands, but also in some alarm.

Blinking, Metal glanced towards where Chaos stood. *"...ah, great timing."* he said, before giving the water creature a nod. *"Allow me to thank you, for letting me experiment on the Chaos Emerald, and... well, creating this."* As he spoke, he motioned towards the Unity energy.

Chaos didn't make any response while he continued to stare at the Unity energy, like he was in a trance.

"...Chaos?" Jill muttered worriedly.

Chaos suddenly looked at Jill quickly, and after one more glance at the Unity energies, he turned and walked away.

"...huh. That was certainly strange." Metal muttered, as he glanced at the Unity energies as well . *"Hrm... I'm curious as to how it can be used in combat, though..."*

"I'm willing to give it a shot," Jill offered. "You can try using it again me to see what effect it might have..."

"...if you insist." Metal nodded, as he allowed the Unity to cover his hands. *"But let's at least move outside; I wouldn't want to accidentally cause a cave-in."*

"Okay," Jill said, jogging over outside with Silver tagging along.

Once they were outside, Silver stopped her. "Jill, is this a good idea?" He asked. "It's a mixture of both, and while Purity can't hurt you, the Corruption in it might...and there's no telling what the Chaos Energy might do."

"Well, we have to test it on me. Judging by how it affects me, we might be able to determine what it could do to the opposite forces, like Callous or Deity," Jill explained. "Besides, try not to think of it as the mix between three energies. Think of it more like one whole energy itself..."

"Okay, I take it that you're ready." Metal said, as he stepped out of the cave, looking at Jill. *"Silver, step away from her; I don't want to accidentally hit you as well."*

"No need to tell me twice!" Silver didn't just step away from her, he scurried away, hiding behind the bushes while he looked between Jill and Metal.

"Okay, hit me," Jill said.

"Alright... brace yourself!" At that point, Metal rushed right at Jill, reeling his arm back, before throwing a punch aimed at Jill's gut.

Jill let the punch come, but anytime before it hit, she never comprehended the damage that would be done to her. She felt such an unreal pain strike her gut, and the impact was so powerful that it sent her flying over the brush near Silver, letting out a pained cry. Then she landed on the ground brutally.

"Jill?" Seeing that, Silver rushed after her.

Even Metal was astounded by that kind of blow, as he could only look at his arms with a shocked look. *"...what power..."* he uttered, before looking towards Jill. *"Ah- Jill!"* he called, as he rushed to her as well.

Silver picked her up when Metal made it to her, and the wind was knocked out of her so hard that she couldn't speak. She set a frail hand on where Metal punched her, and cringed.

"Jill, are you okay?" Silver asked, growing concerned.

Jill couldn't answer.

"...Jill?" Metal uttered, as he knelt by her, looking at her with a concerned look. *"...my apologies. I didn't know that it'd be that powerful..."* As he spoke, he closed his eyes, placing his own hand on Jill's hand.

Jill tried to regain her breath while trying not to think about how much it hurt. It was hard though, because it felt like she was choking on the pain. "..she..."

"Hm?" Silver couldn't understand it, but it looked like she was trying to talk.

"...she...felt it..." Jill uttered.

"...she..." Hearing that, Metal opened his eyes, looking at Jill with a surprised expression. *"...Callous felt it?"*

Jill managed a nod. "...she...felt pain...like me..."

"...instead of feeling the opposite..." Blinking, Metal looked at his arms again, Unity still covering both of them. *"...incredible... with that kind of power..."* he uttered, before looking at Jill. *"...in any case, we should get you fixed up, as quickly as possible."*

"You can heal, right?" Silver asked Jill.

Jill shook her head. "...can't...too weak..."

"...let me, then." Metal said, as he looked at his left arm, which the Unity energy faded away from, before Purity covered it. *"Hope this works..."* he muttered, as he placed his left hand on Jill's gut.

Even with Metal's hand aglow with Purity, Jill still felt the pain nonetheless, and it was completely unchanged. Jill's eyes widened when she realized this. "...no..." she croaked.

"...what?" Silver asked, growing more worried.

"...it's...not healing..." she shut her eyes tightly, trying to keep tears from coming out because of such a devastating discovery.

"...it's not healing?" Hearing that, Metal pulled his hand away, before looking at his right arm, which was still glowing with Unity, in shock. *...what force have I created?* he thought, before glancing at Silver. *"Then I guess we have no choice. We'll have to try and heal the wound, the old-fashioned way."*

"C'mon, let's get her to the caves," Silver said, picking up Jill completely as he rose to his feet. Then he carried her towards the direction of the caves.

Watching as Silver carried Jill off, Metal placed his left hand against his head, as the Purity around it vanished. *Unity... is this going to make defeating Deity easier... or harder?* he thought, as he slowly

followed Silver.

Silver placed Jill against the wall of the cave. It would be this time that Jill regained most of her breathing again, and she buried her face in her knees, howling in her pain. No matter how much she tried to muffle the cry, it could still be heard.

"...geez..." Silver muttered. "Look, calm down Jill. I probably don't know how much it hurts, but it'll get better, okay?"

Jill didn't answer again, falling silent from her scream.

Standing in the mouth of the cave, Metal could only watch Jill, before looking away. *...hrm... somehow, I feel guilty for doing that to her...* he thought, as he closed his eyes. *...great. I can't even think of an excuse for that comment... I've really grown soft, it seems...*

"...Jill?" Silver set a hand on her shoulder. "C'mon, talk to us..."

"...I just needed to let it out, that's all..." Jill uttered, shaking like a leaf in the wind; which Silver could feel.

"...again, my apologies, Jill." Metal muttered, as he began walking away, towards the spring. *"I'll be right back."*

"...Metal?" Jill looked up watching Metal leave. Then she tried to get up.

"No, sit down," Silver urged, pushing her back down. "You can strain it."

As Metal walked away, he glanced at his arms. *...ugh... I feel like dirt. But why? Have I really... grown attached to her?* he thought, as he clenched his hands into fists. *No. I need to remain calm... if she fails, I need to be ready.*

Good thing Johnny and Callous were already done, because Callous felt that pain just as severely as Jill did. Like her, she couldn't breathe at first as she doubled over on the ground in the

pain she felt in her gut, but the minute she was able to breathe again, she also screamed. But she didn't cry out in agony like Jill did; she cursed bitterly.

"GOD#($#+$ $%%*(_%*#$)(_%*($)#%_THAT MOTHERF#($ %#*($#*$#(_!"

"...uh... what happened, Callous?" Johnny uttered, as he looked at Callous with a baffled look. "You looked like you were in pain..."

"NO SHIT SHERLOCK!" Callous snapped back.

"Hey, no need to yell at me!" Johnny said in defense. "Look, just what was it that was so painful, anyway?"

"No freakin' clue what it was," Callous growled, trying to sit up. "But I do know who it came from...and that's the first time that she and I have shared the exact same feeling."

"You mean Jill?" Johnny questioned, as he tilted his head. "Huh... just what could've happened to her that affected you just as badly?"

"Like I said, no clue," Callous replied, finally calming down somewhat. "But I got a feeling on who to ask about it..." she pulled out the Metal figurine with a black puff of smog and glared at it.

"...him, huh?" Johnny mused, before sighing. "I swear, that robot's causing a lot of problems for us..."

"You're telling me," Callous growled, while the Corruption from her hand seeped into the figurine.

Not too long later, Metal could hear a familiar voice barking in his head.

Metal Sonic, you've got 3 seconds to tell me WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!

With a slight groan, Metal leaned against a tree, before closing his eyes. *You know, Callous... I don't think I want to tell you.* he

responded.

And why not? Callous demanded.

Frankly, I don't feel like it. Metal responded, as he folded his arms. *Now, why don't you just hurry along, and we'll talk when the fight is about to start.*

...what's wrong with you anyway? Callous asked curiously.

None of your business. Metal replied, as his eyes opened up. *You know, just because you can speak to me from Angel Island, doesn't mean that I want to speak to you.*

Callous was quiet for awhile. *...you did something to her, didn't you?* she guessed.

As I said... Metal responded, as he glanced to the side. *...it's none of your business, Callous.*

Really now? I guess I'll just have to search yours and her feelings then, Callous murmured.

At that point, Metal suddenly slammed one of his fists into the tree he was leaning against. *You stay out of it... do you hear me? I would appreciate it if you would kindly shut the hell up, and leave me be until the fight!*

Tsk tsk, you certainly have a temper...when you feel rotten for what you did to her. Callous developed an amused chuckle. *Oh, I see...you genuinely feel bad for what you did to her. How adorable.*

...you... Growling, Metal tried calming down, but with Callous pestering him... *...just get out of my head... right now.*

Question is, why would you just punch her like... and then the voice grew dead silent.

...I told you to get out of my head. Metal growled, as he clenched his hands into fists. *And I want you out, right now.*

...you didn't... Callous' voice actually sounded a little shaken, but she

cleared her throat. *Fine, I'll get out of your head...*

And stay out. Metal growled, as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 61

CHAPTER - SIXTY-ONE

In the tombs, Callous was shocked for the first time in her life at what she just found out. "...he couldn't have..." she muttered.

"...what?" Johnny uttered, as he looked at Callous. "Just what did you learn from the tin-can?"

"...he's experimenting with the idea of mixing Purity and Corruption together," Callous answered, glaring at the figurine. "...at first he couldn't do it, but when he used Chaos Energy...he succeeded."

"...mixing Purity and Corruption...?" Johnny said, as he tilted his head. "And it worked? Just what happened when he pulled it off?"

"He decided to test out this new energy they made by using it against Jill," Callous said. "It caused her a lot of pain after just one punch to the gut...but while she felt it, I felt the same thing. The SAME thing! We've never shared the same feeling before!"

"...so not only can it harm anyone using Purity..." Johnny began, as he tapped his chin. "...but also anyone using Corruption?" As that dawned on him, he folded his arms. "...well, we'll just have to make sure that he won't get the opportunity to use that new energy at all. Can't you just fry him now, before he manages to screw everything up for us?"

"No, I have to wait," Callous said. "After all, I do have to play fair sometimes...besides, even if it was a bad thing, there's some good news to it. Metal's starting to crack..." even if now wasn't a good time, she made a small smirk. "...he feels guilty about having hurt Jill. He felt so bad he didn't want to talk to me."

"...he's actually feeling guilty?" Johnny said, as he began chuckling. "What a sap. And he's supposed to be the guy who'd conquer the world? Pathetic!"

"I know, right?" Callous chuckled along with him. "Jill seems to be doing a good job softening up his rough surface."

"Man, that's a riot..." Johnny chuckled, as he took a deep breath to calm down. "So, what are we gonna do with him, once Jill's made him a complete wuss?"

"We'll do what we have planned; torture him," Callous said. "If Jill does end up throwing the match for him, and if she's taken care of, then we can completely destroy him; of course, that's if we can get rid of Jill first."

"Nice..." Johnny chuckled, as he got on his feet. "Still, it's two days until we can see the payoff..." As he spoke, he began thinking. "...just for curiosity's sake, Callous, but one can do just about anything with Corruption, if you have enough willpower?"

"Not only willpower, but the amount of Corruption too," Callous said. "But most of the time, it really just depends..." With a snap of her fingers and a black puff, she was completely dressed again while she too got to her feet.

"...really..." Johnny nodded, as he closed his eyes, starting to calm down. "...if that's the case... I want to try something... and it involves the ghosts around here."

"Exactly what would that-!" Callous cut off when her gut started to cramp. "...damn, it still hurts," she growled, clutching her middle.

"Just don't over-exert yourself." Johnny said, as he glanced at one of the tombstones, before his right arm was covered in Corruption. "But be ready to pull me away, in case it doesn't work." he added, as he placed his hand on the tombstone, letting Corruption seep into it.

Callous watched him, wondering just what kind of spirit would come out this time.

As he kept himself calm, Johnny kept his eyes shut, letting Corruption flow from his hand to the tombstone. *Come out, now...* he thought.

...who are you, and what are you trying to do? A voice jabbed back

at him.

...I'm not telling. Johnny responded calmly. *If you want answers, you'll have to come out of your stone.*

Why? the voice asked again.

I want to try something. Now, won't you come out and show me your face? Johnny thought, still keeping his cool.

What do you want to try? The voice continued to ask.

I'll tell you... if you come out and let me look at you. As Johnny responded, more Corruption began flowing into the tombstone.

Do you want to hurt me or something? A face poked out of the tombstone, showing the shriveled and eyeless husk.

Now how on earth could I possibly do that? Johnny responded, as he looked at the spirit. *Though... the reason you guys have respect for Deity, is because you can't suck out his life, right? Inversely, you people have nothing to lose when it comes to dealing with others, right?*

Even if we have nothing to lose, Deity can bring harm even to spirits, so do you wish to be like him? The spirit asked Johnny again.

At that point, Johnny began chuckling. *Actually... I think all of you spirits are so misled. Thinking that you have nothing to lose... but you know what? I know that all of you have one thing in common that you* can *lose.* In that instant, Johnny covered his left arm in Corruption as well, before suddenly grabbing the spirit by its neck, without letting go of the tombstone.

Your very existence.

But aren't you afraid of dying again? The spirit asked again, gently setting a hand on Johnny's arm that was holding the spirit by the neck. Then Johnny would suddenly feel drastically tired again; more so than when he was dealing with the child spirit.

...you know what...? Johnny thought, as he closed his eyes, trying to

ignore the drowsiness that came over him. *...I want power. What I want is to stand above everyone in the whole damn world...* Then, he opened his eyes, which were actually taking on a bit of a dark glow. *...and I'm gonna use you spirits to do just that.* At that point, Corruption began flaring around his left arm, as he tried pulling the spirit out of the tombstone.

So...are you really trying to prove yourself by destroying me, or striking fear into me? The spirit asked again, though weakly as it continued to suck the life out of Johnny.

I'm not just gonna destroy you... Johnny thought, as he suddenly grinned wickedly. *I'm gonna use you, along with every other spirit on this chunk of rock, to gain more power than anyone else in the whole world...* "...and no one will stand above me." Then, he forcefully pulled his arm back, intending to take the spirit with him.

Just like that, the spirit was pulled out of the tombstone and tumbled onto the ground. Then it tried getting up, looking up at Johnny.

Smirking, Johnny quickly grabbed the spirit with both of his arms, Corruption swirling around them ominously. *Alright... time to say goodbye to your world, ghost.* he thought, as it seemed like he tried absorbing the spirit into him. *From now on... you're stuck in my world.*

...you're new to this, aren't you? The spirit asked again.

For as Johnny was sucking the spirit in, strange memories began to flash through Johnny's mind. They were memories totally alien to him, those of echidna tribes warring with each other, of all the friends this spirit had, and then the image of an echidna woman who supposedly was a gypsy.

Blinking, Johnny tried shaking those images away, as he glared at the spirit. *Enough with your tricks.* he thought. *You're gonna become part of me... and that should make me stronger.*

The images stopped, once Johnny's mind blocked them completely, and the spirit began to fall limp as it was literally absorbed through Johnny's arms.

Callous was impressed as she watched, seeing the spirit slowly fade away.

Here we go... Johnny thought, as he grinned. *...nice knowing ya, ghost.*

Finally the ghost was gone, and completely taken into Johnny, who felt no longer tired. In fact, he felt more energy than he did before, coursing through him like the blood in his veins.

"Well what do you know..." Callous murmured, rubbing her chin.

"...it actually worked..." Johnny uttered, as he looked at his arms, before the Corruption around them faded away. "...and I can even feel the new power in me! This is great!" he eventually laughed, as he clenched his hands into fists.

"Not bad," Callous admitted. "You didn't even lose control of the Corruption this time."

"Yeah, that's right..." Johnny nodded, as he glanced at Callous, still smirking. "...you know what this means? I managed to prove that Deity was wrong! I got the hang of that ghost-thing, and I'm still alive!" Then, he glanced at the other tombstones around them. "...but I can't just leave it at that. How many tombstones are there in this place, anyway?"

"Countless," Callous said.

"...that's perfect." Johnny chuckled, as he looked at Callous. "We have an entire legion of countless spirits lying about, ready to be absorbed and turned into power... so what are we waiting for?"

"Normally I'd agree with you, but who's to say that Daddy hasn't already absorbed those other spirits, though?" Callous said. "Sure, he hasn't been in this part of the tombs at all since we've been here, but what about everywhere else?"

"...true." Johnny nodded, as he looked around him. "But... there's a lot of tombstones around here. We won't know which he has absorbed spirits from until we check." Then, he smirked slyly. "By the way, Callous... when I absorbed that spirit, I got one hell of an

adrenaline rush. If you thought we were wild before... just imagine how wild we'd get after absorbing more of the spirits."

The same sly smirk reflected off of Callous, "that's certainly a thought to behold."

"And why let it remain a thought?" Johnny chuckled, as he placed a hand on another tombstone. "If we get to work right away, not only will we grow even stronger than Jill and Metal Sonic can handle... but we can make that thought one hell of a reality."

Callous couldn't say she didn't like the idea. She smirked while thinking about it, while the Corruption from Johnny's hand seeped into the tombstone.

"...hello?" it sounded like the same child spirit Johnny dealt with once before.

Hm... sounds like we found a familiar one. Johnny thought, as he looked down at the tombstone. "Hey, kid, it's me again. I was just wondering if you still want to play all you want."

"...play?" That lured out the child from the tombstone, looking at Johnny curiously with those black eye sockets.

"Yeah, play..." Johnny nodded, as he moved his free arm to the child, placing it on his head. "All you have to do is to come out of that stone, and I'll show you a really fun game we can play."

"...okay..." the child murmured, pulling itself out completely and standing before Johnny. "...what game?"

"...this game." After saying that, Johnny placed his arms on the ghost, as he began absorbing the child like he had done with the previous spirit.

The child struggled and cried out. "NO! PLEASE! MOMMY, HELP ME!" But that didn't stop anything, as the child was gone and its energy was added to Johnny's gain.

While Johnny was occupied with that, Callous sauntered onto one tombstone herself, curious on trying this out. When she placed her

Corruption-coated hand on the tombstone, she got another voice she could recall. "Oh great, first the boy and now the bitch?" groaned the tough voice that insulted Johnny once before.

"You better believe it," Callous said. She yanked her hand back, and like a retractable leash, it pulled out a built up echidna spirit, who, like all the others, was nothing more than a husk with empty eye sockets.

"What the hell?" the spirit uttered, just as Callous grabbed it. While it tried to suck the life out of Callous, she only clenched her hand around its neck while Corruption started to break it down.

"I'm not only THE bitch, but the Princess of Darkness," Callous chuckled, feeling the energy increase inside of her. Once the tough looking spirit was gone, she took in a deep breath. "This feels exasperating," she said. "I don't know why I never tried it before...but this is a cinch."

"And there's even more to pick from!" Johnny laughed, as he placed both his hands on two different tombstones, Corruption building up around them. "And with how quickly we absorb these things... imagine how many we can get within an hour? Or even a day?"

Callous picked two more out and started putting Corruption to it, while Johnny pulled out two more spirits to absorb. "You know, I think I finally figured it out..." Callous laughed. "...I think I figured out how I could suck the soul right out of Jill; the soul that's rightfully mine!"

"Is that so?" Johnny chuckled, as he got right to work on absorbing the spirits he pulled out. "That should definitely be a sight to behold! I can only imagine the anguished cry Metal Sonic would give out when you do it!"

"It feels so good to even think about the pain we can cause," Callous sighed, while she yanked out the two souls she had and went right to absorbing them too. "Too good to be true."

"Soon enough..." Johnny mused, as he finished absorbing his pair of spirits, before moving towards a different pair of tombstones, placing

his hands on them as well. "...it's going to be true. And it will be one of the best things ever to happen with our lives."

"You can say that again," Callous said, catching up to Johnny as she finished absorbing the spirits and took on two more tombstones. It was like this for awhile, where the two of them kept yanking out spirits to absorb, but it got to a point where there was no more spirits in the area. When that happened, Callous was leaning against the wall, taking in deep breathes as she appreciated the energy that she had acquired.

Johnny was also leaning against a wall, as he looked up at the ceiling with a content smirk. "Man, that really hit the spot..." he mused, before he glanced at Callous. "...but we're not done yet. We've still got time, so let's find an area where Deity hasn't lurked about yet, and continue."

"Right," Callous murmured, taking off through the tunnels in the tombs.

Following Callous, Johnny smirked. *...longer than I have left... yeah, right.* he thought. *Deity, I daresay that you've been outclassed.*

"Finally... we're back." At this point, Sage and Hunter had gotten back to the Chaotix HQ, with Sage landing the two outside the entrance. "Phew... I'm going to need a nap; I've really used my powers a lot more frequently for travel, these days."

"You can go ahead and do that," Hunter said. "I suppose I'll have to find what I can do with my spare time."

"Well, it's a month until the next full moon... so I reckon you'll be able to figure something out." Sage said with a smile, as the two entered the building...

...only to almost immediately be greeted by Wiper cleaning the walls right in front of them. "...well. This is a surprise." Sage mused, just as Wiper noticed them.

"...oh. Hi." Wiper said with a nod to the two, before he went back to cleaning the walls.

"...what are you doing, Wiper?" Hunter asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Paying my dues." Wiper said with a shrug. "Queen and Miser weren't too happy about King's little prank on Ani earlier, so they forced him to do the chores around here for one week. But I figured that since I was in on that little prank, it'd only be fair for me to take my share of the blame."

"...that's quite noble, Wiper." Sage noted. "Well, you keep at it; I have to take a nap."

"Oh, just a word of warning, though..." Wiper began, as he glanced at Sage and Hunter. "...King's making dinner."

Hunter's eyes widened. "...who in their right mind would let King even set his hands on a frying pan or stove? Do you remember the last time he cooked something?"

"Hell, remember any time he tried cooking something." Wiper muttered, as he returned his gaze towards the wall. "No matter what he makes, it always, ALWAYS, ends up well done."

"Don't remind me, Wiper..." Sage muttered, as she shuddered. "I still have nightmares about that chocolate sundae..."

"...that tiger ruins perfectly good steak..." Hunter whimpered, walking away. "...oh. the misery..."

"...you have warned the others, right?" Sage inquired, as she tilted her head.

"Yep." Wiper nodded. "We can only hope that someone else has the foresight to cook something we can actually eat."

"Hrm..." With that, Sage walked off. "Good luck with the walls, Wiper; I'm going to my room."

While Hunter was moping his way down the hall, he encountered Charmy, Boomer and Newt. The three of them were watching the

news on TV, and the story happened to be on the ruined GUN HQ in Station Square.

"...the unexpected attack on the GUN HQ in Station Square, by agents formerly in the employment of the agency, surprisingly enough led to next to no casualties, in spite of several of these agents beng renowned for their thirst for blood." Accompanying the statement were artistic depictions of King, Ripper, Miser and Sage. Since Wiper, Hunter and Queen had taken a stealthier approach, they weren't shown.

"However, the mutilated corpse of one Colonel Reeds, who had retired from GUN some time ago, was found in an elevator shaft. Police and medical staff currently have no comment, regarding what caused his death."

As the news went on, Newt folded his arms. "I wonder who could've done in that colonel; the agents really don't sound like the kind who'd mutilate, y'know." he muttered.

Hunter saw it, and gulped. "...I think I might have an idea who did it..."

Boomer looked over at him curiously. "Who?"

Hunter sighed in disdain. "...some figures from our past..." Then he hurried out of the room, intending to round up the other GUN members. "Everyone else needs to see this..."

Boomer turned questionably to Newt. "...figures from their past?"

"...I don't know." Newt shrugged, as he glanced at Boomer. "Wiper never told me and Natal about anything regarding his past, or anythin'..."

Hunter came back, managing to bring Miser, Queen, Wiper, King, and the GUN Commander herself in order to show them what was on the TV. He figured Sage would figure it out easily enough, so he decided not to disturb her from taking her nap.

"Take a look at this," he told them.

Watching the TV, both Wiper and Queen got very concerned looks on their faces. King, Miser and the GUN Commander, however, didn't seem to get it. "...the colonel was murdered? By who?" the commander mused.

"...oh, I have a feeling..." Queen muttered, as she folded her arms. "Hmph... guess we were lucky enough to get back here, before they were done with him..."

"They?" King said, as he glanced at Queen. "Did you guys meet someone else when ya pulled the commander out of there?"

"...hey, wait a minute..." Newt uttered, as he glanced at the group. "Where's Ripper?"

"Oh..." Miser began. "...he's in the kitchen; since King was called in, he figured he could take care of dinner. He's actually a quite capable cook..."

"I know this may shock you all," Hunter began, closing his eyes. "...but when Wiper, Queen and I went to free the Commander, we encountered...Bloom and Gloom."

Hearing that, King and Miser looked at Hunter in shock. "...B-Bloom and Gloom?" Miser uttered, as she shook her head in utter disbelief. "No... they're supposed to be dead!"

"...like Johnny was supposed to be dead!" King growled, as he clenched his hands into fists. "What kinda- Hunter, did the colonel go out of his way to try and revive everyone from back then?"

"...back then?" Newt uttered, as he looked at Wiper, who didn't return the look. "...what's he talking about, Wiper?"

"If the Colonel revived them, then I don't think they would go kill him," Hunter said. "No...I sensed something else about them too: Corruption."

Boomer's eyes widened and shut tight, growling in despise. "...Callous."

"..her again..." King growled, as he folded his arms. "When is she

going to stop bringing up what happened back then...?"

"Look, I know that this is pretty bad for you guys, y'know..." Newt began, as he glanced at the others. "...but it's kinda hard to get what you're talking about, when we're not in the loop about it."

"...so in other words... you guys want to know." Wiper said coldly.

"Yes, we would like to know," Boomer replied.

"Well, what do you guys think?" Hunter asked everyone. "Should we tell them?"

"..." King was silent, as he looked down at the ground, growling. "...get Ripper and Sage. Wouldn't be right to tell them if we weren't all there."

"...you're serious, King?" Queen uttered, as she glanced at King with a baffled look.

"Yeah... they wanna know? We'll let 'em know." King said, as he glanced at Boomer. "But let me tell you; it's not gonna be pretty. There's no happy ending in this story... what with 18 kids dead, and all."

When Boomer heard that, she gulped nervously.

Hunter left and went to get the two that weren't present, and it wasn't all that long until he returned with both Ripper and Sage.

"...so you all want to hear about those days, huh?" Sage sighed, as she glanced at Charmy. "Well, I can make it a lot simpler for the sake of narrative by just showing it to you... but it's not for the faint of heart. Unless you think you can handle it, we're just going to have to tell you."

"Kekekeke... do we have to?" Ripper uttered, as he sat down next to Miser.

"We've held them in the dark for too long..." Wiper muttered, as he looked away from Newt. "It's too bad that Natal isn't here, though..."

Boomer looked at all of them, and hearing so much that it wasn't a good thing to see, she wondered even more just how bad it was.

"Whenever you're ready Sage," Hunter said.

"...if you insist..." Sage sighed, as she stretched her arms out. "But you've been warned."

Natal let out a yawn, as she slowly sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes drowsily. "Mhm..." she mumbled, as she glanced at Cal.

Cal was asleep, but Natal sitting up woke him up and caused him to crack his eyes open a tad. "..hm?"

"...sorry; did I wake you up, Cal?" Natal said, as she smiled sheepishly, scratching her cheek in embarrasment.

"Yeah, but that's okay," Cal murmured. "Don't need to feel sorry."

"Right..." Natal nodded, as she let out a yawn. "Hoo... that was incredible..."

"Yeah, it was," Cal agreed, as he sat up too, brushing his hair back with his hands. "...you know, I think we left our glasses on the balcony," he said, chuckling.

"Yeah, we did." Natal said with a giggle. "We really got caught up in the moment... should we go get them?"

"Depends. Are the others back yet?" Cal asked.

"...I don't think so." Natal hummed, as she glanced at Cal. "We could go and check."

"I'll check," Cal said, getting up from bed and peeking out from the bedroom door.

While Cal peeked out of the room, Natal glanced at him, without moving out of the bed. "See anyone?"

"...I don't see anyone," Cal said. "And it's a little too quiet..."

"...wait..." At that point, something came over Natal. "Oh... I forgot that Milo didn't go to Future City with the others! And if it's too quiet..." Then, she quickly got out of bed, before starting to get dressed. "Cal, I got a bad feeling. We've got to check around the house, and see if we can't find Milo."

"Right." Cal tapped into his devices and searched the Clubhouse for any readings of life. While he did that, he also realized that he couldn't detect any Chaos Energy. "...I think Proxy's gone," he said. "Because I can't detect any Chaos Energy anywhere in the Clubhouse."

"Proxy's gone?" Natal uttered, just as she finished getting dressed. "What about Milo? Can you spot him?"

"Nothing yet," Cal said, walking out the door. "I'm going to walk around and see if I can find him." With that, he left down the hall.

"...in the meantime, I'll see if I can't spot him." Natal mused to herself, as she walked out into the hall, going the opposite direction that Cal did, so they'd cover more ground.

Cal happened to walk into the kitchen while he was searching, and his eyes fell upon something magnetized to the fridge. He pulled it away, and discovered that it was the note from Proxy when he looked it over. "Ah, okay then..." he murmured. "So they've gone to see the Professor..."

After a while, Natal entered the kitchen as well. "Nothing... did you-" she began, when she noticed the note Cal was holding. "...what's that?"

"Here," He said, handing it to her. "I don't think we have to worry."

Taking the note and reading it, Natal eventually let out a sigh of relief. "Phew... now we know where they are..." she said, before wiping her brow. "Got all worried over nothing..."

"...but if Brick and the others still aren't back yet..." Cal realized something to some surprise. "...we're all alone in the Clubhouse."

"...yeah... we are." Natal nodded, as she placed the note on the table. "Huh... what do you know..."

"...I think I might go grab our glasses," Cal said. "Before-!" That moment, he ran into a wall when he thought he was going through a doorway. Then he staggered back in embarrassment. "Whoops. Guess I still can't see very well without them..."

"Ouch..." Natal winced a bit when Cal crashed into the wall, as she walked up to him. "You alright, Cal?" she asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm okay," He said, smiling in his embarrassment while looking at Natal.

"That's good." Natal said with a smile as well, before glancing down the hall. "We can go and get our glasses together."

"That sounds good," Cal murmured. "...the balcony, right?"

"Yeah... the balcony." Natal nodded, as she began walking down the hall, before glancing back at Cal, waiting for him to follow.

Luckily his sight was good enough to see Natal, so he followed her without a problem. It was even good enough to see that both their glasses were sitting on the railing of the balcony when they got there. "Oh, there they are," he said, grabbing the pair that he thought was his. Only they weren't; the ones he picked up were Natal's, so when he put them on, he felt that something was off about them.

"...wait, are these my glasses?" he asked, blinking a few times to try and concentrate his sight.

Natal couldn't help but giggle, as she picked up Cal's glasses. "Actually, those are mine." she said, as she took her glasses away from Cal, before placing his own glasses over his eyes. "There. Better?" she said with a smile, as she put on her own glasses.

"Ah, that's better," Cal said, adjusting his glasses. Then he found himself staring at Natal, and slowly smiling. "Gosh, you're gorgeous," he suddenly said.

Hearing that, Natal instantly blushed, as she let out another giggle. "Why, thank you." she said, as she looked at Cal. "...you're mighty handsome, too." she said.

Cal's smile widened, and he blushed too. "Thanks..." And for awhile, he was like that. Then somehow, his smile fell as the blush faded from his cheeks, and he actually looked worried. "...Natal, what's everyone going to say about this?" he asked. "I'm sure a good deal of them still hate my guts..."

As Cal said that, Natal scratched her chin in thought. "...I can't exactly predict how people are going to react..." she said, as she placed a hand on Cal's shoulder, looking at him. "...but I know that you're a good person. We just have to figure out how to let the others see that, as well."

Cal still wasn't sure how that would be done, and he set his own hand on her hand on his shoulder. "...how we'll convince Wiper and Newt is beyond me..."

"Oh, we'll work it out, don't you worry." Natal said, as she smiled. "Newt's gonna be the hard one to convince, if only because... well, he's kind of hot-headed. But I'm sure Wiper can keep Newt from doing anything to you."

"...I'm sure Boomer will still hate me all the same...especially after what I nearly did to her..." Cal wasn't even sure he ought to be in her line of sight even.

"...yeah, she's definitely going to be the toughest..." Natal muttered. "...but I'm sure that it'll work out in the end, Cal."

He looked at her deeply. "...well, if you say so," he said, trying to smile.

Seeing his attempt at smiling, Natal couldn't help but smile as well.

"...since we're alone, what do you want to do?" Cal asked out of curiosity.

"Oh, I don't know..." Natal began, as she placed her other hand on Cal's chest. "...depends on what you want to do."

"...well," Cal murmured, wrapping an arm around her waist. "...we could go a third time, if you'd like."

"...I think I'd like that, yeah." Natal nodded, as she wrapped her arm around Cal's body as well.

Cal smirked, and he couldn't stop himself from reaching over and kissing Natal. Natal took the kiss in pleasurably, as she pulled Cal closer to her. His tail already came around and started stroking her thigh as he dug his hands underneath her coat, touching her back. Natal let out a moan, as she allowed her tongue to enter Cal, having it wrap itself around his own tongue, while she began stroking Cal's own back. Cal quivered in delight at the taste of Natal's tongue, and he fondled her breasts in reply, while his tail curled around her leg. Natal let out another moan of pleasure, as she held Cal tightly, pressing their bodies together. Cal grew all the more earnest while being close, and he would've been completely carried away if he didn't suddenly remember that they were on the balcony. So he broke his lips away.

"...I think we'd better get back to the bedroom," he whispered.

"...yeah, we should." Natal nodded. "Let's go."

This time, Cal was the one to lead her away as he took her by the hand, and the two of them entered inside the Clubhouse.

Chapter 62

CHAPTER – SIXTY-TWO

Brick and Jack decided to leave the course since Lock somehow didn't return, and they ran into Ani.

"Hey guys!" Ani called, stopping beside them and dismounting her Extreme Gear.

"Hi, Ani!" Jack said, just as Tails Doll fluttered next to Ani. "And Tails Doll, too!"

"Hi, guys! You're done racing, already?" Tails Doll said.

"Yeah, but we had a little run in with Punk the Stuck-up Parrot," Brick grumbled.

"Well what do you know? I was just racing with Gale," Ani mentioned in surprise. "I beat her too!"

"You did? Awesome!" Jack laughed.

"Speaking of, Punk showed up on our track as well; he was being chased by Lock!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered towards Brick, landing on his head. *"But I got him with some sneeze-gas, and Lock scared both of them away!"*

"Sneeze-gas?" Brick tried to hold in snickering.

"What was it all about anyway?" Ani asked. "Gale said she had some questions for me, and that's why we raced."

"...weird. Punk said that I had answers he wanted when I met him on the course." Jack mused, as he scratched his head.

"That's strange. Why do they want us to answer questions, anyway?" Tails Doll said curiously.

"Who knows, but somehow they got interested in us," Brick muttered. "Not only that, but Lock's working to make sure that they leave us alone."

"...oh, yeah! Tails Doll, do you know where Lock is now?" Jack asked, as he looked at the doll.

"I don't know..." Tails Doll shrugged. *"He sped off after telling me and Ani to meet up with you guys... he's really mysterious."*

"...do you think we should confront Gale and Punk about why they're chasing us around?" Ani asked. "If we can walk up to them as a group, they probably won't do anything to us."

"I don't know, Punk was pretty willing to fist fight right there when Gale tripped me," Brick murmured. "But then again, that was before they knew what we were capable of."

"...wait..." Jack began, as he tapped his chin. "They know what we're capable of, yeah... but what about Striker, Rudy and Whisker? Do they know what they can do, as well?"

Brick thought about what Jack said. "...maybe we aught to head to the Speed course and check on them," he said.

"Yeah, let's see if they're alright!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered back to Ani. *"Go, go, go!"*

"To the Speed course!" Jack said, as he pointed in one direction quite dramatically. "...so which way is the Speed course, again?"

Brick laughed, while he got on his gear. "Follow me guys, I know where it is."

Meanwhile...

"YEAH!" Rudy exclaimed. He and Striker were racing on the Speed course, which was recreated as a jungle; different than the Mystic Ruins. For Whisker, he could watch them from a tower that stood, overlooking the entire course. There were even some simulated dinosaurs that walked around while the racers passed by them.

"Yar har har har! Ye`re doin' great, boys!" Whisker laughed, as he watched Striker and Rudy race across the course. "Give 't all ye got!"

"C'mon Striker!" Rudy taunted, waving his large tail at the bear cub. "Is that all you got?"

"Just wait, Rudy!" Striker laughed. "You'll be blown away!"

The two of them ran up the back of a large dinosaur from the tail up to the head, and at the tip, jumped through the air while doing tricks.

"They be naturals at this!" Whisker laughed, as he watched the two kids like a hawk. "Aah, if only Johnny, Mini an' Mum be still around, so they could be seein' this..."

Shortly after they landed, they crossed the finish line; simultaneously too, so neither one could determine who won the race. When they dismounted their gears, they exchanged a high five.

"Great racing Rudy," Striker said.

"Thanks, you too!" Rudy replied.

"Guys!"

Striker and Rudy turned just in time to see Ani, Brick, Jack, and Tails Doll ride in, and jump off their gears by them.

"Oh, hi!" Rudy said. "How was your guys' racing go?"

"You guys are okay, right?" Brick asked.

Striker blinked at that question. "Yeah, we're okay Brick," he replied. "Is something wrong?"

"Well... we had a run-in with those birds from earlier, and we wanted to check up on you guys!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered in front of Striker.

"Them guys?" At that point, Whisker had gotten down from the

tower, approaching the group. "What did they want wi' ye?"

"Apparently, they wanted us to answer questions..." Jack said with a shrug.

"Did they say what questions?" Striker asked.

Ani shook her head. "I raced Gale and beat her, but Lock kept coming around and stopping them from getting what they wanted."

"You beat Gale?" Rudy gave her a thumbs up. "Awesome!"

"But why is Lock stopping them?" Striker asked again.

"Well, Punk nearly choked Jack to death for them," Brick mentioned bitterly. "That could go with reason, but if all they wanted to do was ask simple questions, I don't know why they won't just come up to us and ask us."

"Because we wouldn't want to answer them after what they did to us," Ani threw in.

Brick threw his hands up in the air. "Whatever! The point is, that for some reason they've gotten interested in us."

"...you know, we could just..." Jack began, as he scratched the back of his neck. "...I don't know... ask them to just tell us what they want to know?"

That got Tails Doll to look at Jack with a baffled look. *"...I can't really make sense of that..."* Tails Doll said.

"But if they really want us to tell them something, then it'd be rude of us not to let them know, right?" Jack said, as he shrugged. "Maybe they just want to know who built our Gears, or something?"

"An' they`d go as far as chokin' ye fer 't?" Whisker uttered dryly, as he looked down at Jack.

"Even then, we outnumber them!" Ani added. "If they wanted to do anything to us, we'd beat them easily!"

"...well, I think we should go with Jack's suggestion," Striker said. "I mean, it's something we could try."

"That is if Lock doesn't stop us," Brick grumbled. "And I'd rather be stuck with Cal than..." Brick stopped himself, realizing that he was in Rudy's company, whom reacted a little severely to Brick's comment. "...sorry bud, I didn't mean it like that," he muttered in guilt.

"...no, it's okay," Rudy replied, even if he remained unchanged from his depression. "C'mon, maybe we can look for them." When the kangaroo hopped away, Striker gave Brick a hint of a glower.

"That wasn't nice, Brick," he said, after which he followed Rudy.

"...Rudy..." Jack sighed, as he followed Rudy and Striker.

"...awkward..." Tails Doll mumbled, as he glanced at Brick.

"Ahoy, we canna stand around all day." Whisker said, as he gave Brick a nod. "Let`s be seein' if we canna find them."

"...alright," Brick didn't mean to hurt Rudy's feelings, but he knew that sometimes things came out of his mouth without him knowing. Watching Ani follow them, he accompanied.

"Hey, woah, lay off the guns!" At this point, both Punk and Gale were being held at gunpoint against a wall in an alley by Lock, who was glaring at them intently. "Seriously, what the hell is up with you, Lock?"

"Don't give me any lip, Punk." Lock snarled, as he pressed a gun closer to Punk, before glancing at Gale. "Now answer me. What do you want with those

people?"

"...all we wanted to do was ask them a few questions, that's all," Gale sent a glare at Lock, and while he wasn't the boss of her, she didn't exactly want her brother getting shot either.

"What kind of questions?" Lock pressed. "Be specific."

"What's it to you, anyway?" Punk snapped. "You don't even know those people, so why do you bother-" At that point, Lock pushed the gun right against Punk's forehead, silencing the hawk.

"I hear a lot of talk, but it doesn't sound like a satisfactory answer." Lock growled, as he didn't move his eyes from Gale. "Well?"

Gale grit her teeth. "We wanted to know why they knew Miles Prower. After all, they said that we should give our Grandpa his hello...but Grandpa's never seen Miles Prower in a long time; probably longer than 50 years."

"...your grandfather..." Lock muttered, as he recalled the conversation he had with Brick and Jack earlier. "...and you try to coerce them by hurting them?"

"Hey, I already told ya, Lock; the kid was blasting me with a sonic wave, and I kinda panicked!" Punk protested, as Lock glared at him. "You've got no reason to have a grudge against us, you know! Even for you, this is just petty, Lock!"

"Besides, they wouldn't have told us if we asked them nice and polite like, anyway," Gale added.

"...why? Because you acted so appropriately when you first met them?" Lock said, as he shook his head. "You could have saved us all trouble, and me ammo, if you had just bottled your ego up and asked them directly."

"Still, the questions remain; why do you bother getting involved, when you barely know these kids?" Punk began. "And why did you show up here in Future City, with the kind of prize on your head? And would you please get this damn gun outta my face?"

"Yeah, at least we can swallow our pride enough to ask you those questions," Gale said.

"..." Silently, Lock aimed the gun away from Punk, who let out a sigh of relief. "...I know what kind of tricks your grandfather used to pull on hapless strangers. Don't think that I wouldn't try to stop you from repeating the process." As Lock spoke, he folded his arms. "And like

it or not; this city is my home. I could care less if I had the biggest bounty in the world; I live here."

Gale rolled her eyes. "You're calling those guys "hapless?" That wolf girl used powers I've never seen from anywhere else except sci-fi fantasy movies..."

"And do I have to reinforce the fact that the lion's got a harmonica that puts out more decibels than five metal concerts combined?" Punk uttered, as he rubbed his temples. "I swear, I thought I would go deaf..."

"Whatever." Lock muttered dryly, as he turned away from the two, before beginning to walk away. "Just don't try anything foolish. I'll know right away, believe me."

Gale waited until Lock was gone to let out her own sigh of relief. "...do we seriously have to go up to them and ask them ourselves?"

"...guess so..." Punk muttered, before growling. "Sheesh... talk about buzzkill."

Gale and Punk left the alley into the city streets, and coincidentally enough, Brick, Whisker, Tails Doll and the kids whizzed by on their gears, stopping before them. Of course, the Babylonians got dirty looks from all of them, but nothing violent occurred.

"We hear that you have some questions for us," Brick told Punk.

"...yeah, we do." Punk nodded. "So..." Gritting his teeth, he rubbed the back of his neck. "...mind if we ask 'em, or something?"

Brick didn't expect Punk to say that, and he looked at Gale, who turned away from him grudgingly. Then he shared questionable looks with everyone. "...okay, shoot them," Brick said.

"...First of all, we'd like to know how you know Miles Prower," Gale started.

Silence, and then, laughter erupted from Brick. "...is that really all you wanted to know?" he said, wiping away a tear from laughing so hard.

"Look, can you just answer the question?" growled Gale.

"Okay, okay, take it easy," Brick told her.

"We've known the Professor for a long time!" answered Ani. "Well, I'm sure that Brick, Tails Doll, and Whisker have known him longer than me, Striker, Rudy, and Jack have known him, but he's our friend!"

"Yeah," Striker added. "He told us all these cool stories about his adventures with Sonic the Hedgehog, and one of them happened to be the story where he raced the Babylon Rogues; Jet, Wave, and Storm! That's how we know your guys' Grandpa."

"...I didn't get to hear that one..." Rudy said. "I only know the parts of the stories that Captain Charmy told me."

"...Charmy?" Punk uttered, as he glanced at Rudy. "You mean Charmy the Bee? One of the Chaotix? How the hell do you kids know him?"

"Easy; Rudy's part of the Chaotix!" Jack said with a smile.

"...seriously?" Punk uttered in disbelief.

"Aye, seriously." Whisker nodded.

"...who are you guys?" Gale asked in the same disbelief as her brother.

"Well, nobody in particular," Brick said. "We just get involved with a lot of important people..."

"Like Shadow!" Ani spat, before she could stop herself.

"...no way..." Gale uttered. "...you knew Shadow the Hedgehog too? From GUN?"

Everyone fell silent, because that reminded everyone of that dark night, when Shadow was killed by Metal Sonic. Brick looked especially grave. "Yeah, we knew him..." he muttered.

"...woah..." Punk uttered, as he glanced at Gale. "...these guys are something else, aren't they?" he whispered to her, so the others couldn't hear it.

"...I'm still wondering how they knew such important people in the first place..." Gale whispered back, as the two Babylonians turned their back to the group. "...do you think we should tell Grandpa about these guys, Punk?"

"...you know..." Punk whispered, as he nodded. "...I think we ought to."

"Ahoy, what be ye two whisperin' about?" Whisker suddenly said, something that made Punk stiffen.

"...um... nothing?" Punk tried, as he glanced at the group.

"That's not what I heard..." Tails Doll mused, as he tilted his head while looking at the Babylonians.

Gale looked at the group long and hard, while rubbing her beak thoughtfully. In fact, why just tell Jet about them? They were here in the flesh, and that didn't mean they couldn't actually come and see him. "...I think you guys should meet our Grandpa," she finally said, getting surprised looks from everyone.

"...say what?" Brick muttered.

"...yeah, sure!" Punk laughed, as he turned around to face the group. "We're feeling hospitable, so why not?"

"...just like that?" Jack uttered, as he tilted his head. "Seems like a pretty sudden 180 to me."

"Yeah, and I find that a little suspicious," Brick returned, looking at them skeptically.

Unlike Punk, Gale kept calm. "Listen, we won't try anything," Gale said. "You guys have strange powers, and can easily beat us up when it calls for it. We might be double-crossers, but we're also not stupid. Believe me...we learned the hard way that we don't want to

get on your bad side again."

"Darn straight!" Ani remarked, with a confident smirk that made Gale frown. She didn't forget that she lost to this little girl, and that didn't make her that happy.

If only Lock hadn't butt in, she thought.

"So, how about we just forget about all this, and we take you to see our Grandpa, eh?" Punk said. "It's not gonna hurt ya, you know."

"...I don't know..." Tails Doll hummed. *"Brick, what do you think?"*

Brick scratched his chin. "Actually, I wouldn't mind meeting Jet the Hawk. Nothing exciting has happened in awhile for us, so it should be a nice, new experience."

"I don't know. I kinda liked it when Callous didn't attack us 24/7, so I'm not sure I want to jump into more stuff," Rudy said, without realizing what he just said.

"...Callous?" Gale asked. "Who is that?"

"NO ONE!" The entire group answered without skipping a beat, and simultaneously too.

Gale just stared blankly at them.

"...okay, kinda weird..." Punk muttered, as he scratched his head. "Well, in any case, we'll take you to see him. It's actually just a few blocks away, so we don't need to ride Gears to get there."

"Cool," Ani commented.

"...he's been out there for a long time," Jill murmured.

"...I'll go check on him," Silver said, getting up from where he knelt by Jill. "Stay here, okay?"

Jill sighed. She really wanted to go with him to make sure nothing

was wrong with Metal, and even if the pain from her middle was less than it was, she couldn't really move much, so she watched Silver leave the cave against her consent.

Boy, some really weird things happen between them, Silver said. *Imagine if Dr. Eggman saw him now...* .

After a while, Silver found Metal sitting by the spring, just looking at the water without uttering a sound.

"...Metal?" Silver spoke, intending to get his attention.

"...hello, Silver." Metal uttered, without looking at the hedgehog. *"How is Jill coming along?"*

"She's okay," Silver answered. "It wasn't really serious..."

"...really." Metal said, as he sighed. *"That's... good to know."*

"Jill was a little concerned about you, so I came to check on you," Silver said.

"She was..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...well, I'm fine, more or less."*

"...you sure?" Silver asked. "I mean, I'm not usually the skeptical type but...you're just so much different than the Metal I remember seeing last, you know."

"...time does have that kind of effect on certain people." Metal replied, before he let out a sigh. *"...Silver. I want you to do me a favor."*

Silver didn't expect a favor from Metal, but he took it calmly. "Okay, what?"

Hearing that, Metal stood up, before turning to face Silver. *"...make me feel like a villain."*

"Wha?" Silver was pretty confused on that request, not knowing what he meant by that.

"...you know..." Metal began, as he scratched his head. *"A villain. The bad guy. The sort of person who people aren't meant to sympathize with, but rather scorn for their acts."* After saying that, he groaned. *"It must sound completely ridiculous... but believe me, I need to be reminded that I'm not a good guy."*

"...what did she do to you anyway?" Silver asked in disbelief. "I mean, personally, I thought you were using her to just get rid of common enemies, but from the sound of things...Jill's actually had an effect on you."

"I know, and frankly, that genuinely frightens me." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"I need to be able to focus on training her... but I fear that I'll worry too much for her well-being to be an effective coach. Not to mention what Callous could-"* Quickly, he stopped himself from finishing that sentence.

"...Callous could, what?" Silver asked. While Jill told him a good portion of what happened, it was an entirely unbiased explanation; nor was Callous explained all that much to him. Of course, this was obvious when he had asked Metal before how Jill seemed to change him.

"...n-nothing." Metal uttered, as he turned away from Silver. *"Forget that I brought it up..."*

"Well, okay..." Silver muttered, while he started rubbing his chin. "...still, I don't even know how I'd motivate a bad guy. I'm not exactly the best one to do that..."

"Well, at the moment, you're the only one I can ask." Metal said, as he glanced at Silver from over his shoulder. *"If I went and requested Jill to do a thing like that, there'd be questions that I'd be forced to answer... and frankly, I don't want her to hear those answers."*

"...but even then, how would I go about it?" Silver asked, scratching his head. "I mean, do I tell you that you're a horrible killing machine or something?"

Metal shrugged. *"I don't know. This is the first time I've ever had to*

ask someone to make me feel like a villain. So, try improvising, or something..."

Somehow, Silver felt really dumb doing this... "...uh, maybe you shouldn't let worrying about Jill overshadow beating Callous?"

"That's sort of the thing; I WANT Jill to beat Callous. I NEED Jill to beat Callous." Metal said, as he rubbed his temples. *"...but for crying out loud, that girl is very influential. Even though she knows what I've done... she still wants to help me find something better to do. I can't help but admire that."*

"So, you admire that, but..." Silver felt even more dumb being a therapist to a robot. "Did you tell her that you didn't want her to help you or something?"

"...no." Metal muttered, as he folded his arms. *"Well... not directly, at least. I've said that it would be hard finding anything else apart from world conquest for me to do... but in recent times... I've actually considered it."*

"...It could be a stupid suggestion, but..." Silver scratched his head again. "...think about what Dr. Eggman might do, if he was in this situation."

"...Eggman..." Metal muttered, as he rubbed his head. *"...well, in a situation where he had to train his arch-enemy to combat a greater evil, and eventually wound up befriending said enemy..."* For a short while, Metal was silent. Then, he suddenly began chuckling. *"No, that's just too humorous."* he said.

"...heh, Eggman and Sonic, friends..." Silver actually had to admit that was a funny thought.

"Aah..." Metal sighed, before shaking his head. *"Ugh, this is not helping."* Groaning, he sat down again. *"If there was some way I could just let out some steam... maybe that'd help me calm down about this."*

"...maybe you could fight me?" Silver suggested again.

"...maybe that could work." Metal nodded, as he glanced at Silver, before standing up. *"In fact... I'll let you throw the first punch."* he said, before turning to face Silver. *"Go on, hit me."*

"Okay." Silver wasn't much of a puncher, but with the help of his telekinesis he could improvise a little. He brought up a nearby boulder out of the ground, taking on his light turquoise glow, and threw it right at Metal.

With blinding speed, however, Metal quickly threw his fist at the boulder when it came at him, smashing it into pieces upon impact, leaving him untouched. *"Is that it?"* he scoffed, as he got in a fighting stance.

"Nope!" Silver concentrated hard enough to even take up Metal, and attempted to throw the Metallix against a tree.

While it seemed like Metal would collide with the tree, however, he stopped dead on, as he used Silver's own data to push himself against Silver's force. *"Don't think I wasn't prepared for that."* he chuckled, just as a laser shot out of his chest, aimed at Silver.

Silver put up a force-field around him, barricading the laser and its ricochet hit the ground nearby, making a crater. Then he lifted himself up, and made a dash at Metal to headbutt him with the barrier.

Before he could hit his target, Metal suddenly raised his arm, stopping Silver right in his tracks. *"This ability really does come in handy at times."* he chuckled, as he pushed his hand forward, which would propel Silver away from him.

Silver was knocked onto his back on the ground, but he quickly got back up. He uprooted two trees nearby, and decided to smash Metal between them.

Raising his arms, however, Metal stopped the trees before they could even touch him, before he hurled them right at Silver with the force of a cannon.

"Whoa!" The force was even too strong for Silver to stop with his

own power, and he was barely able to move himself out of their way, while the trees did damage to some of the wilderness.

"...you know, this is actually helping!" Metal laughed, as he looked at Silver. *"Go on, toss something else at me!"*

Silver looked at Metal strangely, but decided to comply as he looked for something tougher than a tree or a boulder. Instead of tougher, he saw something a little more complicated-like; a thorn bush. He picked it up, and threw that at Metal, wondering if he would get tangled up by it.

However, Metal simply stopped the bush before it could even touch him. *"Come on, put more force into it; I'm not even trying, Silver!"* Metal laughed; he genuinely seemed to be having fun.

Somehow, Silver was actually getting a little ticked. He dismantled the thorns from the bush, and launched them at Metal like a rain of darts.

But again, Metal stopped the projectiles before they could reach him. *"Are you even trying? I told you to put more force into it!"* he laughed, as he began rotating the thorns around his body, just to show off. *"Or is that all you got?"*

Silver grit his teeth, growing more irritated. "That's just cheap; copying my abilities like that!"

"Oh, cry me a river." Metal chuckled, as he spun one of the thorns around on his finger. *"Or better yet, try actually hitting me this time around."*

Silver clenched his fists while his irritation grew to anger, and energy started building up around them. Throwing his palms forward, he shot out a massive force intending to knock Metal back.

Metal didn't expect that, as he quickly threw his arms forward to try and repel the blast, but being thrown off his guard was still enough to push him back a bit. *"...alright, you got the drop on me."* he chuckled, as he glanced at Silver. *"But come on; I barely felt that. Are you going to try harder, or not?"* Then, he pushed his arms

forward again, this time creating a force blast of his own, which rocketed right at Silver.

"...oh geez..." Silver was knocked back again by that blast, and he immediately got back up. *How is he more powerful than me, when he's using my powers?* he wondered in thought. *...wait a minute...* "...are you using a Chaos Emerald?" he asked.

"So what if I am?" Metal laughed, as he motioned for Silver to come right at him. *"Now are you going to stop playing around, and start fighting seriously?"*

Silver ran at him. "Why don't you start fighting seriously!"

Back at the caves, Jill swore that she could hear something going on in the wilderness, and she was bewildered at the things she heard; trees falling over, and tremors every now and then. As slowly and as carefully as she could she got up. The funniest thing was that her middle wasn't in as much pain as she thought, so she was just fine walking out of the cave. "Just what could they be doing?" she murmured.

Silver, meanwhile, coated his fists with his energy and were throwing them at Metal.

Metal, however, easily ducked and weaved away from Silver's punches, without throwing a single punch back. *"Come on, I know snails who could give me a harder time than this!"* he said, continuing to egg Silver on.

"Why you!" Silver tried a kick at his face.

Only for Metal to catch it in mid-air. *"That's not all you have, is it?"* he chuckled, as he pushed Silver away.

Silver swatted his hand at Metal, shooting a chunk of energy at the metallix.

Metal quickly responded by firing his own blast of energy at Silver's energy blast, causing the two to explode. *"Is that all? Come on, I'm not even-!"* In that very instant, Metal stopped, as his eyes widened. *"...n-no..."* he uttered, his cheery demeanor instantly vanishing.

"...what?" Silver certainly found it weird that Metal lost it that quickly.

At that point, Metal sunk to his knees, as he looked at his hands in complete shock. *"...I... I can't believe it..."* he uttered in a horrified tone, before he held his head. *"Why... why did I act like him...?"*

"Act like who?" Silver thought about it and after having observed how Metal was acting, he had a feeling who he was talking about. "...you mean, Sonic?"

"...I don't get it..." Metal uttered. *"Why would my mind suddenly shift to his, of all people? It just happened; I had no control over it... what's happening to me?"*

"...well, you were made by his data after all..." Silver murmured. "...but why that happened, I have no clue."

Jill made it there just then, and while they didn't know she was there, it wasn't long before her presence was known. Seeing Metal like that, she was shocked and worried. "Metal?"

"...Jill?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at the ewe from the corner of his eyes, before looking away. *"...you shouldn't walk about too much; you could get hurt."* he said quickly.

"I'm fine now, don't worry about me," she said, coming over to the two of them. "But what's going on? What happened?"

Silver didn't answer and remained quiet, leaving it up to Metal to answer her.

"...nothing." Metal said, before he got back on his feet, still not looking at Jill. *"Nothing happened."*

Jill looked at Metal, and then looked at Silver, hoping he would answer, but the white hedgehog didn't. Sighing, Jill looked back at Metal with some sadness. "...why won't you tell me anything, Metal?"

"...because it has no relevance to what we're aiming to accomplish." Metal replied halfheartedly. *"We don't have long before your fight with Callous comes around, so we need to make sure that you're in*

peak condition. Anything else is irrelevant."

While it was reasonable, Jill didn't imagine she would hear that kind of response. She turned away, and all she could say was, "...is that so?" With that, she began walking away back where she came from in silence.

As she walked away, Metal finally glanced at her as she left, before he closed his eyes. *...great, now I feel guilty again, on top of everything.* he thought, before walking towards the spring, sitting down by it.

Silver looked back and forth between Metal and where Jill had gone, and sighed. *Here we go again...* he thought.

"...leave me." Metal muttered. *"I need some time on my own... I'll be back in a while."*

"...alright," Silver said. Then he turned and walked away himself, heading in the same direction Jill had gone.

That left Metal completely on his own, as the machine held a hand in front of his eyes. *... is my body beginning to malfunction...?* As he moved his hand away from his eyes, he spotted something truly bizarre; in spite of it never touching the spring, that hand was wet. *...is that a...* In that instant, Metal clenched his hand into a fist. *...what's happening to me...?*

Chapter 63

CHAPTER – SIXTY-THREE

"Well, here it is." At this point, Punk and Gale had brought the group to their destination, which was an apartment, with nothing really noteworthy on the outside. "This is where Gramps lives." Punk said.

"...okay..." to be honest, Brick actually expected something bigger than this. In fact, he recalled that Tails said they had an airship. "...didn't he have an airship?"

"He has that parked underground, don't you know." Punk said with a wave. "I mean, who's gonna live in an airship that's not even airborne? That's just asking for someone to hijack it when you're asleep."

"...that does make sense..." Jack hummed after a short while.

"Speaking of which, he should be asleep by now, so don't be too loud." Punk said, as he walked towards the front door.

Gale had a key, and unlocked the door, allowing everyone inside and closing the door quietly behind them. "So, you wanna wake him up, or should I, Punk?" she asked.

"It's your turn, so go ahead, Gale." Punk replied, as he folded his arms.

"Brilliant," she groaned, rolling her eyes. "Make yourselves comfortable, and uh...cover your ears in a little while. He may be old, but he's got one hell of a yell..." and with that, the she-hawk made her way down the hall towards her grandfather's room.

"...I still find it strange," Brick murmured, picking out a seat on the couch in the living room, while the other kids squeezed next to him.

"What? The fact that he doesn't have an airship lying about?" Punk inquired, before chuckling. "What I find weird is that he somehow

manages to sleep more than 24 hours a day every week."

"...that's kind of exaggerating it..." Tails Doll noted.

"Well...if you think about it, he's older than the Professor," Ani muttered. "He may need more sleep..."

Gale made it to her grandpa's door and knocked on it first. "Hey Gramps, you in there?" she called.

However, she got no reply, other than faint snoring.

"Of course," she grumbled, opening the door and walking in. In there, she found someone lying in a bed, with a newspaper covering his face, though it didn't exactly block out the snoring. Gale walked on over and pulled the newspaper off of him. Then she made sure to yell loudly, "GRANDPA!"

"PHWAH!" That was enough to get the eldery goshawk in bed to sit straight up. "No more shrimps, I'm..." he uttered, just as he realized that he was awake, before he looked at Gale. "...oh, is it dinner already, Gale?" he said.

"Actually, no, Grandpa," Gale replied, folding her arms. "We've got some visitors that would like to meet you."

"...visitors?" With a yawn, he scratched his neck. "Well, if it ain't door-to-door salesmen, I guess I could see them..."

"Door-salesman? Nah...Grandpa, these character's are a real catch." Gale closed her eyes. "They even say that they know Professor Miles Prower personally. Not to mention Captain Charmy from the Chaotix, and Shadow the Hedgehog."

"...Prower? Charmy? Shadow?" That caught the goshawk's attention. "Is that so... well, where are they? Let me see who these people are."

"In the living room," and Gale left the room, expecting that Grandpa Jet would follow her.

Indeed he did, as the two walked down towards the living room,

where the group would see them coming. "So, these are the people you were talking about?" Jet uttered.

"Ah, you're finally awake, Gramps." Punk said, as he glanced at the group. "Well, here he is; Jet the Hawk."

Brick stood up while he looked at Jet. "So you're Jet the Hawk?"

"...he's old!" Rudy threw in.

"I was just about to say that!" both Jack and Tails Doll chimed in.

"Old?" Jet snapped. "Why, the nerve! I oughta teach you some manners!"

"Okay, Gramps, no need to blow up just yet." Punk said, as he stepped in front of Jet. "Calm down now, you hear?"

"...fine..." Jet muttered, before he folded his arms. "So? What do you kids want here?"

"We wanted to meet you," Striker said, standing up next to Brick. "The Professor told the story about you, and your teammates, Wave and Storm."

"Basically the rise of Babylon Garden and the ordeal with the Ark of the Cosmos," Brick clarified.

"Really? Those stories, huh..." Jet muttered, before grinning. "I remember those stories like they happened just yesterday! And let me tell you, it was a blast from start to finish!"

"Yeah, you told us that a thousand times, Grandpa..." Gale murmured.

"Man, if only Jill could meet Jet the Hawk..." Striker said. All these talk of adventure reminded him of what Jill went through, and what she was still going through.

"Yeah..." Jack nodded, as he sighed.

"...hey, what's with the gloomy faces?" Jet uttered, as he tilted his

head. "And who's this Jill chick?"

"Well...how would we go about saying this?" Brick scratched his head. "...she's a pretty important person in our group, and she's not here right now because...she's training."

"...training for what?" Jet uttered, as he tilted his head. "An Extreme Gear tournament?"

"...she's training to fight someone," Rudy said. "Someone really mean and very powerful."

"...that wouldn't happen to be that Callous person you guys mentioned earlier, would it?" Gale guessed. Everyone shot her shocked looks. Gale just shrugged. "Well, you said something about her attacking you guys. It's the only connection I could make."

"...Callous? Who's that?" Jet inquired.

"She's a really bad person!" Jack said. "She's been bothering us for a while, and Jill's gonna fight her to make her stop!"

"...is that so?" Jet mused. "Is this Jill chick training on her own?"

"...yes and no..." Brick averted his eyes.

"You're not telling us everything, are you?" Gale asked.

"We have a good reason," Brick said.

"And what reason would that be?" Punk inquired, as he folded his arms.

Brick grew pretty serious. "The kind of information we know is not to be taken lightly. We can't just share it with anyone...but," He looked up at Jet then. "...part of me feels like your Grandpa deserves to hear some of these things."

"...so, what, you want me and Gale to step outside?" Punk uttered.

"...You guys can stay here, I guess..." Brick said.

"Well, let's hear it, then." Jet said, as he sat down, looking at Brick. "Go, on, don't be shy, or whatever."

"Awhile back, about two weeks ago, Metal Sonic revealed to the world that he returned," Brick said. "He said that he would halt his tyranny if there was someone strong enough to face him. Not much longer, Shadow the Hedgehog fought him in the streets of Station Square...and was killed by Metal Sonic."

Gale looked at Brick in shock. "...and, you know this, how?"

"We saw it with our very own eyes," Ani threw in, clenching a tight fist.

"...hm. I did read that Shadow had died in the papers..." Jet muttered, as he closed his eyes. "It didn't say nothing about that tin-can doing him in..."

"From Shadow, Metal Sonic collected all 7 Chaos Emeralds."

Gale looked amazed now. "...the Chaos Emeralds? But...no one's seen them since-"

"-Knuckles the Echidna died, I know," Brick said. "But since Metal Sonic returned, Shadow felt that he should recollect the emeralds from their hiding places and use them against Metal, but...Metal just took them from his dying body."

"What happened?" Gale pestered. "Go ahead and tell us more."

"Alright...at that moment, someone else stepped up to the plate against Metal," Brick said.

"It was Jill!" Striker answered.

"...wait, what?" Punk uttered, as he tilted his head.

"No joke!" Jack said. "She battled against Metal Sonic- and won!"

"...you're serious?" Jet said, as he rubbed his head. "Just... let me get this straight. Metal Sonic, souped up on all of the Chaos Emeralds' power... lost to this Jill chick?"

Brick nodded to Jet's question. "...you probably wouldn't believe it if we just told you, but...that girl has an unreal power."

"For awhile, it's been like that!" Ani continued. "Jill trying to fight Metal Sonic's forces! Even when we were living with Captain Charmy at the Chaotix HQ, he sent us robots and agents after us! One of them even turned out to be someone who was part of the Chaotix..." Seeing Rudy's reaction, Ani tried to soften it up. "Well...I mean, that guy's changed now, but that's beside the point."

"It wasn't until more powerful enemies came up that Metal's advances halted," Brick said. "Callous arose from nowhere, and at first she was working for Metal Sonic, but things started getting out of hand, and she went rogue."

"Callous is basically like Jill's evil twin sister!" Striker added. "Only she was created by this really bad guy that used to terrorize Jill long before we met her!"

"Whoa! Slow down!" Gale said. "Now you guys are taking off like bottle rockets." She looked at all of them, and knew that this information couldn't have been made up. "...describe this Callous chick more, before you start losing us again."

"Like Striker said, she's Brownie's evil twin," Brick said. "She uses unnatural powers like her, but...it's beyond description. I mean...she uses darkness." Brick then turned to Jack. "Jack, maybe you could describe her better? She captured you once..."

"...she's really mean, for one thing." Jack muttered, as he folded his arms. "And she doesn't care about anyone but herself. That's the reason she keeps on bothering Jill; because she wants Jill's soul for herself..."

"...okay, you lost me." Punk said, as he scratched his head. "She's created by some evil guy, modeled in Jill's image, and she wants her soul, to boot? This is sounding pretty ridiculous at this rate."

"Hey, you weren't there, so you don't know what we've gone through!" Tails Doll said defensively.

"Alright, settle down..." Jet muttered, as he gave Brick a nod. "Go on, tell us more."

"...the same guy who created Callous, is the one who murdered Sonic the Hedgehog," Brick finally said, staring right at Jet.

"...what?" Hearing that, Jet got out of his seat, looking at Brick with a baffled look. "...get out of town. That was decades ago; whoever did Sonic in must've died of old age by now!"

"Unless he was immortal," Brick said. "The man is named Deity Novagod; said to be a vampire that can absorb life energy and use others like puppets. Not only had he killed Sonic, but it's assumed that he took the lives of Fang the Sniper, and Knuckles the Echidna as well."

"...Fang the Sniper?" Gale uttered. "You mean...Lock's Grandfather?"

"No way..." Punk uttered, as he scratched his head. "Does Lock know about this?"

"We haven't told him..." Jack said, as he scratched the back of his head. "Actually, we didn't plan on explaining all of this today, right, Brick?"

"...well, don't stop there!" Jet said with an increasingly impatient tone. "Keep on telling us about this!"

"According to some news we were told, he's been alive since the Dark Gaia incident long ago," Brick said. "He's been alive for this long, and one fateful day, he met Brownie."

"...You're talking about that Jill girl, right?" Gale asked. "It's kinda confusing with the nickname you know..."

"Yes, it's her," Brick said, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, bad things happened to her, and she was banished from her home and he's harassed her psychologically, physically, and any other possible way that could make her life miserable. Callous' birth was part of those efforts..."

"But in the end, Jill still beat Deity!" Striker said.

"...what?" Gale sputtered. "You're saying that this Jill put him down?"

"...no," Brick said. "Brownie sealed Deity away...for now. That was only 5 months ago, and I found her in the Mystic Ruins jungle, running a fever. I took her to the Professor's shop to nurse her back to health, and...ever since then, more friends came on the way."

"Yeah, I met them not too long after that!" Ani said, raising her hand. "Then Striker, Jack, Buddy and Milo came along too! Milo's not here though...he's back at our Clubhouse!"

"...well, you've certainly got a history to ya." Punk said, as he hummed. "But there's still something I'm wondering about; you said that Jill's training in order to fight Callous. Why would she need training, if she's been able to take care of both a vampire and Metal Sonic?"

"Callous got more powerful," Brick said. "Not only that, but she's gathered more forces...from what I heard, the training is for the ultimate showdown between her and Brownie."

"So they're gonna settle it, then..." Jet muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...then I take it that she's going after the vampire, once she takes out Callous?"

"Yes," Brick answered. "...and I don't mean to put you at unease...but Deity could likely break free from his seal sometime soon. The training could very well be to prepare her for when he's loose, too."

"...but I have to ask this..." Punk mused, as he raised an eyebrow. "Just who is strong enough to be able to properly train her?"

"We're sworn to secrecy about that, sorry," Brick said, folding his arms. Then he shot a look at the others to send the message to do the same; not to tell them it's Metal Sonic that's training Jill.

"...right." Jet muttered, as he sat down. "Still... I do wonder what the hell Metal Sonic is doing, if he's not trying to take advantage of Jill going off to train. What, did Callous destroy him, or something?"

"My best guess is that he's trying to figure out his own way of trying to deal with Callous," Brick said, shrugging. "I wouldn't know, but I'd lay low too if I was outmatched by a girl." Brick couldn't believe he just said that. "...forget I just said that, okay?"

"Why?" Gale looked at Brick strangely.

"...just, never mind," Brick said, rubbing his temples.

"Hm..." Nodding, Jet let out a sigh. "Well, since you're all here... and since I'm awake... I don't suppose that you kids would want to stay over for dinner?"

"Dinner?" Jack uttered, as he glanced at Brick, waiting to see what he would say about that.

"...it's a kind offer," Brick said. "But I'm not sure...we've been out all day and I'm wondering how Natal and Proxy are holding up at the Clubhouse..."

"...You're not talking about Natal, from Team Alpha in GUN, are you?" Gale supposed.

"The very same actually..." Brick responded.

Gale shook her head. "You cease to amaze me..."

"You certainly know a lot of important people." Punk noted. "What about Wiper and Newt? Are they at this Clubhouse, too?"

"No, they're someplace else." Jack responded.

"Yeah, they're currently with Captain Charmy on some personal business," Brick added.

"I sure hope that Boomer's doing okay..." Rudy suddenly said out of nowhere.

"Don't worry Rudy, she's tough and she's probably all better already!" Ani said, in hopes to cheer him up.

"Yeah, she should be coming around!" Jack said, also wanting to

cheer Rudy up.

"...well, don't let me hold ya back, then." Jet chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "If you've got no more business in town, maybe it's time to call it a day?"

"Yeah, we probably should get going," Brick mumured, which caused the kids to let out a big groan. Then he turned to them, "I know you guys wanted to stay...but we can always come back out here, tomorrow, right?"

"...I guess," Ani said.

"I suppose so. Punk, Gale, you two can take the kids here to the station, can't you?" Jet said with a chuckle.

"Only if you promise not to fall asleep before we get back." Punk replied.

"I don't think that's a promise he can keep, Punk," Gale laughed.

"Oh, I'll show you!" Jet said, as he looked at Gale. "If I'm awake by the time you two get back, you two are going to do all the housework for a month!"

"But we already do the housework around here, Gramps." Punk noted, something that got a chuckle out of the kids.

"...fine, then you can think of conditions on your own!" Jet said with a pout.

Brick chuckled. "Is your family always like this?"

"Oh that's nothing," Gale said with a swat of her hand. "You should see him during the holidays. Now lets go." Before she got any response from Jet, she ran along out the room and toward the front door, with most of the kids following; except Rudy.

"It was cool meeting you, Jet!" he said, hopping away afterward.

"...hm." Jet hummed, as he sat down. "Haven't heard anyone call me cool in a while." he mused, before glancing at Punk, giving him a

nod.

"Yeah, yeah..." Punk nodded, as he followed Gale and the kids outside.

"Shouldn't take long to get to the station on our gears," Gale said, climbing aboard hers. Not long after her, Brick stepped up onto his, and the rest of the kids followed in example.

Punk, too, was about to step on his gear, when he blinked. "...Gale, you get the feeling that someone's watching you?" he uttered.

"Yeah," Gale murmured. "And I get a pretty good feeling who it is too..."

"...who?" Jack inquired, as he looked around him. "We're the only ones out here."

"Eh, don't worry about it." Punk shrugged, as he got on his gear. "Let's go!" he said with a smirk, as he sped down the street.

Brick immediately took off after Punk, leaving the rest in the dust, (or in this case, air turbulence) while he made it nose to nose with the hawk. "Okay Punk, now I've got a question for *you* ," he said. "If Jet's living in that apartment with you guys...then what about Wave and Storm?" He was pretty curious since he hadn't seen them at all.

"...I dunno." Punk shrugged. "Maybe they've died from old age, maybe they're traveling around the world, who knows. Gramps doesn't talk about them too often, except when he's talking about his exploits back when Sonic was still alive."

"I see," Brick murmured.

"Nothing. We've searched, high and low, every single tombstone in this entire place, and what we've got was only a small fraction of what Daddy took?" Callous was somewhat frustrated that Deity was a few steps ahead of them...almost as if the vampire knew of the uprising that was being planned between her and Johnny.

Then again, it wasn't like her to be really careful. In fact, she was totally careless about everything...well, most things.

She was craving more of those spirits, and she had no idea how addicting this new power could be.

"Hrm... there's got to be something we've overlooked..." Johnny muttered, as he was leaning against a wall, rubbing his temples. "Something that both we and Deity haven't thought of before now..."

Callous only tried to think. Her thoughts led to wanting to get off this flying rock, and only if there was a way to get off. When her mind wandered, she suddenly remembered something. "...Johnny, don't you have a Chaos Emerald?"

"...yeah, I do." Johnny noted, as he tapped his hand against the container lodged into his chest. "It's what GUN used to bring me back to life... so, for pretty obvious reasons, it's been stuck as a replacement for my heart ever since."

"...are you capable of Chaos Control?" she asked again.

"...to be perfectly honest, I don't know." Johnny shrugged. "It's not like I've been alive for long enough to properly try testing it."

"We could try testing it now," Callous suggested. "If it works...we might have a way to get off this island if we wanted to."

"...that's true. I never even thought of that." Johnny noted. "Right, let's give it a try." he said, as he looked towards the end of the room. *Okay... tapping into the emerald's power...* he thought, as he closed his eyes, just as the small light on the container began blinking rapidly, indicating that the Chaos Emerald was being used.

Suddenly, his eyes shot open. "Chaos Control!" In a flash, he suddenly disappeared from where he stood, reappearing at the other end of the room.

Callous smirked. "Well, well...looks like you can do it after all!"

"...it certainly looks like it." Johnny nodded, as he approached Callous. "But I need to make sure that I can do it with passengers

with me; otherwise, both of us won't be able to get off this rock."

"Go ahead." Callous said.

"Alright..." Nodding, Johnny grabbed Callous' arm, as he glanced at the same spot he had warped to earlier. "Chaos Control!" Then, without warning, both he and Callous disappeared from where they stood, reappearing at the other end of the room.

"Whoa, that's a whole new thing, isn't it?" Callous muttered, holding her slightly dizzy head. Then she shook it off. "Amazing."

"Yeah..." Johnny nodded, as he looked at his own hands. *...incredible!* he thought. *I got not only Corruption and the spirits feeding me power... but I can use Chaos Control as well! I'm really gonna leave a mark in history now!* With that thought in mind, he glanced at Callous. "So, ready to leave this hunk of rock?"

"More than ready," Callous said. "There's so many things we can do once we get out of here."

"And the best thing is..." Johnny laughed, as he took hold of Callous. "There isn't anyone who can boss us around once we get out! Name a place you want to go to, and I'll have us there in no time at all!"

"There's so many places..." Callous murmured. "...I don't think I could chose just one."

"...say, I got an idea." Johnny chuckled. "What city has a massive graveyard somewhere?"

Callous thought about that. "...Westopolis, actually," she chuckled. "If we're lucky, we might even be able to make off with the two Chaos Emeralds that Metal Sonic hid within the city."

"Well, then we have a plan ready." Johnny chuckled. "Chaos Control!" In that instant, both of them vanished.

Boomer stumbled down the hall in silence. The things she had seen were pretty traumatizing indeed; the kind of things she would only

see in her nightmares. Now what she saw would probably give her nightmares too. Charmy tucked in early for the night, since what he saw was just too much for the old bee; it reminded him too much of his own tragedies that he shared with Tails and Cream.

At some point she stopped and pressed her head against the wall. "...why...?" she uttered. "...why would GUN do those things...to innocent children?" What she saw totally shattered her opinion on the noble GUN she thought she knew, and wanted to join.

"...hey." she would hear Wiper say, as the cobra was walking towards Boomer, though his eyes were closed. "Sorry that you... had to sit through that." he muttered.

"You don't need to apologize to me," Boomer said, without looking back at him. "...it just really shocked me."

"It was a shock to everyone." Wiper muttered, as he stopped. "Newt's gotten really worried about me, wondering if that event had any effects on my psyche... and the Commander was never informed of any of this at all. All just one of Colonel Reeds' twisted experiments..."

Boomer clenched her fists. "...and all of GUN went along with it?"

"...actually, no." Wiper said, as he closed his eyes. "Apart from some loyalists, Reeds kept this project a secret from GUN until the survivors got away from that place. And even then, he handwaved it by saying that we willingly joined the group... he was a deceptive bastard."

"So it was just him." Hearing that relieved Boomer a lot. "...I didn't mean to think that GUN could have been entirely involved. Nowadays it's hard to know what to believe...I mean..." she trailed off with a sigh.

"...with all that's been going on, I'm sure it's hard to know what to think. I've had that problem, too." Wiper muttered, as he glanced out a window. "Just don't think about it. What's done is done; nothing can change it. And, well... if it had been changed, chances are, we'd never have met you guys."

"...I know." With that, Boomer turned and started to walk down the hall.

Glancing at her, Wiper let out a sigh. *...now that everyone here knows... how am I supposed to let Natal know about this...* he thought.

"...If Newt comes looking for me, Wiper, I'll be in my room," Boomer called back, before disappearing into her bedroom.

"...roger." Wiper muttered, before he began walking down the hall, his thoughts drifting away.

It was getting dark...

...but Jill and Silver didn't know that. They were deeper in the caves; the very chamber with the glowing green rocks in fact. She decided she didn't want to wait around for Metal, and Silver offered to spar with her for the time being.

So far, it had come to this.

Jill was in her Holy Form, flying past the cave walls while Silver hurled stalactites and stalagmites at her. Training in the caves may have been dangerous, and they considered that, so they were trying to be as careful as possible.

Jill somehow disappeared from Silver's sights, and he was looking around to find her. "Where'd you go?"

"I wouldn't turn around if I were you."

Silver felt something sharp pressed against his back, and the most he could do was glance back. Jill had her sword pointed into his back. *"That's checkmate, Silver,"* she said.

"...you've certainly shown improvement, Jill."

Jill turned to the source of the voice. *"Thanks, Metal,"* she said,

pulling her blade away from Silver's back.

"Don't mention it." Metal shrugged, as he approached both her and Silver. *"Sorry for taking so long; I needed time to think."*

"Think about what?" Silver asked purely on reaction.

"A lot of things, really. I won't bore you with details." Metal shrugged, as he leaned against a wall. *"Well, Jill, tomorrow's the last day of training before the fight. As I've said, I'm going to let you decide how you want to train that day, since you've been doing great so far."*

"Aerial combat," Jill said immediately. Silver gave her a surprised look. *"If Callous does happen to turn into a form like mine, she'll likely be able to fly too. I figure I could practice some fighting in flight."* After a small glow, Jill reverted to her normal, ewe self.

"Hm. That would be convenient." Metal noted. *"I'm sure that both I and Silver can properly instruct you there."*

"Not only that, but I could use archery from afar," Jill added. "I want to make sure I'm not rusty after all...it's been awhile since I used my bow." Passing by Metal, she aimed toward the mouth of the cave where settlement was. "...since it's late, I should get all the rest I can..."

"You do that." Metal said, as he closed his eyes. *"See you in the morning."*

Jill said nothing and was gone down the corridor.

Silver closed his eyes, sighed, and shook his head. *When is this going to stop...?* he thought. *If you ask me, I'm kinda getting sick of all this drama already.*

" *...so, what about you?"* Metal uttered, as he glanced at Silver. *"After we're done with Callous, are you going to go back to your own time?"*

"I really don't know," Silver replied honestly, scratching his head. "It kinda depends on what happens."

"Please. Is there any doubt about what's going to happen?" Metal said, as he chuckled. *"Jill defeats Callous, claims her prize, and then we take down Novagod. Really, what other outcome would come out of this?"*

"Metal, if anyone should know that things don't always turn out the way you plan, it's me," Silver said. "I mean, it's not specified how Jill could defeat Callous...after hearing about the whole "connected by a soul" thing, a lot could happen with that."

"Listen, I have that all covered." Metal said. *"As long as Jill defeats Callous, she is obligated to allow Jill to take back that part of her soul. If she tries something fishy, I'll hold her to her word by force."*

That's what you think, Callous' voice suddenly chuckled in Metal's head.

Yes, I do think that. Metal thought, as he closed his eyes. *And yes, you're going to lose. Face the facts; even with me as leverage, you won't win against her.*

Oh, I don't know about that, Callous continued. *I seem to be gaining more leverage as the days pass...*

...what do you mean? Metal uttered, as he blinked.

Nothing really. Just looking quite contently at two Chaos Emeralds I recently got, Callous mocked. *Not only that, but I did some training of my own...and found out I could do a pretty nifty trick.*

Hearing that got Metal's eyes to widen. *...how... weren't you stuck on Angel Island?*

Did I say I was STUCK on Angel Island? No. I simply said I was ON it. But thanks to Johnny's Chaos Control, we're off that forsaken rock until the battle comes, Callous explained with glee. Even if Metal had been right, she wouldn't admit that to him. *And I must say that*

Westopolis sure has a massive graveyard...

...what does that matter to you? Metal thought, as his hands clenched into fists.

If I can steal souls, then I would think it would matter a lot to me, Callous replied.

That made Metal reel back in shock. *...you...* Growling, he shook his head. *It doesn't change a damn thing... you're going to lose!*

You keep saying that, but is that to convince me, or yourself, Metal? Callous taunted.

Metal was actually losing his temper, though he tried keeping his cool. *I'm not convincing anybody; I'm reinforcing solid facts* . he thought.

The only solid fact you're reinforcing is what you'll do just to hide the fact that you don't want to lose Jill, Callous laughed.

...what was that? Metal uttered, as one could tell that he was on the brink of snapping.

You heard me, Toaster! Callous said. *Or would you* like *to hear me say it again?* She was really enjoying egging him on.

At this point, Metal was positively seething with rage, as he clenched his hands together. Unbeknownst to him, his rage began fueling the Chaos Emerald in his body, creating an aura of energy around him. *...get out of my head.*

What are you going to do, tough guy? You can't stop me from messing with your mind, Callous sneered.

I said... At that point, his eyes flared up. *"GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"* With that roar, the Chaos Energy aura suddenly exploded around him, creating a fierce shockwave around the Metallix; strangely enough, even Callous would feel the impact from this outburst.

And while Callous was somehow blown off the figurine all the way in Westopolis, this shock wave also targeted Silver. "WHOA!" He had no time to dodge, and he was knocked against the wall from the impact.

However, Metal took no notice of that, as all his rage was focused on the aura around him, intensifying it by the minute.

Silver tried to get up, but by being hit by such an intense force, he was weakened greatly, and he only collapsed again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jill rushing to the scene...and then stopping in shocked silence. This time, she did not utter Metal's name at all, but only looked at him.

She even trembled a little.

Still, Metal didn't notice anyone, or anything, as the aura grew even stronger around him.

"...Metal!" Jill tried to call out, trying as best as she could not to sound shaken. Even then, this was the time that Chaos encountered the scene as well, having sensed the disturbance in Metal's emerald only to see this. The creature froze.

Not even being called by name did anything to quell Metal's rage, as he forcefully shut his eyes, which increased the aura's strength even further.

With this going on, it scared Jill. But that didn't make her back down. Deep down, she sensed the power from the emerald, and interpreted it. She could feel his uncontrollable anger...but how this happened, she had no idea. Something had been going on with Metal for awhile now, but he's never let on what, and now she had to do something to calm him down.

"Metal!" She tried to call again, while she conjured up some Purity around her arms; just in case she had to resort to it.

Still, apart from Metal letting out a yell which gave the aura even more power, there was no response from the Metallix.

Maybe she might need more power... Figuring that in her mind, Jill

quickly transformed into her Holy Form, and charged at Metal, grabbing him from behind despite the energy around Metal that could harm her. Her arms around him tightened, while the Purity began to rub off onto the metallix.

Not only had her power been used to heal, but knowing that it had soothing properties, perhaps she could use it to try and calm Metal down.

Thankfully, this had an effect, as Metal visibly began calming down, with the aura slowly, but surely, diminishing around him.

But it sure took quite a force to calm him down. Jill was already quite weary while she allowed the Purity to take its toll on Metal, but she kept holding on. Silver managed to bring up his head to gawk at what was going on.

It took a while, but soon, the aura disappeared, and Metal sank to his knees, his eyes looking down at the ground.

Jill let go, and came around, kneeling down in front of him. "*...Metal?"* she muttered.

However, Metal didn't respond to her, as he closed his eyes.

"...Metal, please look at me," she said, after which she brought up his chin with a finger to make eye contact.

However, he was quick to look back down, as if he was ashamed to look at her. When he did that, however, Jill would hear a sound coming from the Metallix, which she'd never have expected to hear from a machine.

Sobbing.

Silver blinked. *Is he...?*

Jill didn't know what to do; well, she did but she was a little afraid to. Metal's crying caused her to cautiously raise her arms, and hug Metal gently. Metal, surprisingly enough, grabbed hold of Jill as well, hugging her as he kept crying. Jill would even feel something wet drop on her back, as the Metallix hugged her. A little alarmed she

was for what she felt on her back, but at the moment she felt that it was more important to comfort Metal than question what was on her back.

" *...I..."* Metal eventually said, as one could hear his voice cracking up. " *...I'm sorry..."* he added, before breaking into more sobs.

"...it's okay Metal," Jill hushed, holding him dearly.

Silver stood up finally, but said nothing as not to interrupt it. *...I can't believe there's someone that treats Metal Sonic so...gently,* he thought. *More so, I can't believe he's acting this way...*

Soon, Metal's sobs began dying out, though the Metallix didn't let go of Jill. She didn't let go either, and she had almost forgotten the curious substance on her back while being caught up with what was happening.

However, Silver spotted whatever it was.

"...Jill, what's that on your back?" he asked, because he couldn't help but ask.

Hearing that question caused Metal to blink, and as he did, Jill felt more of that wet substance trickle down her back. Strangely, it came from Metal's eyes.

When Jill saw that it came from Metal's eyes, she was amazed. She started to wipe it away with her thumbs, *"Metal?"*

"...I..." Metal uttered, as he looked absolutely baffled. *"...I... have no idea..."* Jill didn't know what to say. A robot making actual tears was not an everyday sight, but Metal was only as surprised as she was. *"...this..."* Metal uttered, as he wiped away another tear, observing it with curiosity. *"...what's happening to me...?"*

"Don't know," Silver said. "We were hoping you'd know..."

"...this is beyond me..." Metal uttered, as he clenched his hand, which made the tear fall to the ground. *"In all my years... I've never had an emotional outburst like this..."*

"...is there something messing with your programming or something?" Silver said. "I heard that the first time Eggman created that form, you malfunctioned and turned rogue...what if something like that is happening again?"

"...no... it can't be anything like that..." Metal muttered, as he got on his feet, before placing a hand against the wall. *"... Eggman fixed every flaw with the program... it's been working fine until now..."*

Jill rose to her feet, though had trouble since she was weak. *"...do you think Purity and Corruption are having some sort of unforeseen side effect on you?"*

"...I don't know..." Metal mused, as he began walking off to the mouth of the cave. *"...let's get some shuteye. We have a long day ahead of us."* he muttered.

Jill took a step forward and found she did not have the strength to take it, so she stumbled.

"Whoa there!" Luckily Silver was there to catch her. "You okay?"

"Yeah, it just took a lot out of me..." she answered. She even automatically reverted back to her normal self after saying that.

Metal glanced back at Jill when she reverted, before looking back ahead of him. *...no matter what, I can't tell her.* he thought, as he kept walking. *She needs to remain focused...*

Chapter 64

CHAPTER – SIXTY-FOUR

"Hey look! It's them!" Milo called out while pointing outside of a window in Tails' shop. He didn't even wait for Tails or Proxy to respond as he burst out the front door and ran to them. "Guys!"

"It's Milo!" Striker said, rushing toward the lion cub that came their way.

"Hi Milo!" Rudy said, hopping after Striker.

"Milo!" Jack called, as he ran after Striker and Rudy. "You should have been there! It was awesome!"

"Awesome like you wouldn't believe!" Tails Doll called, as he fluttered around Milo a few times.

Seeing the group arrive, both Tails and Proxy walked out of the building, both of them waving to the group. While the kids conversed among themselves, Brick went over to Proxy and Tails.

"So how did you two hold up?" he asked.

"Oh, we've been fine." Tails said, as he smiled a bit. "I take it that you had quite the day in Future City?"

"Yar, ye bet we did!" Whisker laughed, as he approached the trio as well. "But... 'ere`s Natal an' Cal?" he inquired.

"Likely back at the Clubhouse." Proxy shrugged. "Natal had gone to bed before me and Milo went to see Tails, and we couldn't find Cal anywhere... but I'm sure that they're at the Clubhouse."

"Wait, you didn't see Cal anywhere?" Brick said. "Isn't that a bad thing? What if he's up to something?"

"I don't think he could do anything, even if he wanted." Proxy chuckled, as he held up the cyan Chaos Emerald. "There really isn't

anything he'd find valuable there apart from this, and I'm sure that Natal could take care of him, if he grew hostile."

"Well, you've got a point," Brick admitted, rubbing his chin. "By the way Professor, we met some interesting people in Future City."

"Really, now?" Tails said, as he chuckled. "Just who would that be?" he inquired.

"Oh, some kids that called themselves the Babylon Rogues," Brick said in a joking way. "At first they were a little annoying, but eventually we got to know them, and it just so happens that Jet the Hawk was their grandfather."

"Really?" Tails mused, before chuckling. "I didn't know that Jet had grandchildren... did you get to meet the old bird as well?"

"Actually, yeah," Brick said. "He wasn't all that bad either, but it was pretty funny to see him get agitated with his grandchildren."

"Well, good to hear that there's life left in him, after all these years..." Tails chuckled. "Did you meet anyone else, or was that it?"

Brick turned away for some reason. "...yeah, we met this bounty hunter too; went by the name of Lock." Then he looked back at Tails. "Lock the Sniper."

Hearing that name startled Tails. "...the Sniper?" he uttered. "...so Fang did start a family..."

"Mostly it was just a quarrel between him and Jet's grandchildren; Punk and Gale," Brick said. "But Lock was a pretty shady character, and he kept a lot to himself."

"...I see." Tails muttered. "...I never once heard of Fang starting a family at all... most peculiar..."

"...I didn't think Jet the Hawk would have a family either," Brick added. "Judging by your description of his personality, Professor, he didn't seem like the fatherly type...or the grandfatherly type for that matter."

"True..." Tails mused. "...though I do have to wonder who his significant other was..." he hummed.

"Guess I'll have to ask Punk or Gale who their grandmother was, tomorrow," Brick murmured.

"So you're going back there tomorrow?" Tails noted, before chuckling. "Maybe you can get Natal and Milo with you this time."

"I don't think it'd be a good idea for me to go, though." Proxy shrugged.

"Not sure about Milo after the incident with his gear," Brick murmured nervously. "But I guess I'll have to ask Natal to see if she wants to come with." He turned and walked away. "Well, better get to the Clubhouse. Nice seeing you Professor."

"Same to you, Brick." Tails chuckled.

"Well, 'tis been a long day!" Whisker said, as he followed Brick. "Time t' get some shut-eye."

"I concur." Proxy nodded, as he followed the two. "See you around, Tails." he said, giving the fox a wave as he left.

"C'mon guys, let's get to the Clubhouse," Brick said, with all the kids nodding. Ani wished so much to go through the mines since she had been gone for awhile, and Brick gave into her request. Emerging from the other side of the tunnel, Milo leaped out and kissed the ground.

"Aw c'mon, it wasn't THAT bad, was it?" Ani asked, which got chuckles out of the crowd.

Then they made it to the elevator doors at the roots of their tree house, filing in to rise up the floors. It was at this point that Cal jolted awake. His sensors indicated that there was Chaos Energy present, as well as a good number of other life forms in the elevator. This could only mean that everyone was back.

So he tried to shake Natal awake. "Natal! Wake up, I think they're back."

"...they're back?" Natal uttered, as she rubbed her head while sitting up. "...oh, snap, they're back?" she suddenly said, as she quickly got out of bed, before getting dressed equally as fast. "I gotta hurry; they're probably starving!" The moment she finished getting dressed, she ran out of her room heading for the kitchen.

And I need to get out of her room before I'm caught, Cal thought, putting on his own clothes and activating his cloaking as he crawled out the bedroom door...ceiling wise. Luckily there were a bunch of things hanging from the ceiling to cling to, and he made it to the couch he had slept on before, and deactivated cloaking, so that when the group entered into the room, he would seem like he was ordinarily sitting there the whole time.

Brick was the first to walk up to him, while Cal looked up at him. "You didn't try anything while we were gone, did you?" he asked.

Cal shook his head. "No. I think it's been a pretty good day for me."

Brick raised an eyebrow. "...okay. Well, good to know." And the bull walked away, puzzled.

"Hiya, Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll called, as he quickly perched himself on top of Cal's head, looking down at him. *"...where's Natal?"* he inquired.

"In the kitchen! Dinner's gonna be ready in a few minutes!" they could hear Natal call through the halls.

"Yes! Natal's cooking dinner!" Rudy blurted, which got a strange look from Brick around the corner. "Er...I mean, well, I'm pretty hungry." Brick shrugged and left the room, leaving Rudy to sigh in relief.

"Hey Cal, your hair's all messy," Milo observed.

"Oh, uh...I was climbing trees today," Cal began, trying to think of an excuse. "I tripped on a branch and fell. I didn't get scratched up, but I guess my hair got roughed up in the fall..."

"...climbing trees?" Jack inquired, as he tilted his head. "Why? Did a bird steal your glasses?"

Cal just now realized he wasn't wearing them, and while he wondered how he got all the way out here without running into anything, he looked away. "...yeah," he muttered. "Kind of embarrassing, huh?"

"I'm sure that you'll find them eventually, Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll said cheerfully. *"But I do wonder what Natal's cooking..."* With that in mind, the plushie fluttered off towards the kitchen.

"Hey, maybe she'll need some help," Milo said. "Wait for me!" With Milo running, the other kids were pretty curious too, so they followed him; except Rudy.

"...what's the matter, Rudy?" Proxy inquired, as he glanced at the kangaroo. "Aren't you going to follow them?"

Rudy didn't answer just yet, but he glanced back at Cal. It took the monkey a minute to realize that Rudy was staring at him, and at first it felt a little weird. Then he eased up.

"...I hope you find your glasses Cal," Rudy finally said, hopping away after where the other kids had gone.

Cal was amazed that Rudy even spoke to him and he sat there, stunned.

"...hm." Proxy hummed, as he watched Rudy leave. "Strange..."

"Well, come on, Proxy. We canna exactly eat, so we might as well call 't a day." Whisker said, as he led Proxy down the other hall, but not before regarding a nod to Cal. "Be seein' ya tomorrow, Cal."

"Uh...see ya," Cal replied, also pretty amazed that Whisker was talking to him too.

"Hey Natal, did the same bird who stole Cal's glasses steal yours too?" Cal suddenly heard Striker ask from the kitchen.

"Hm?" Natal uttered, before realizing that she wasn't wearing glasses as well. "Uh... yeah, actually, it did. I'm planning on finding that bird tomorrow, and getting them back, though."

"Wow...I can't believe a bird did that!" Rudy commented.

"Need some help looking for him? A bird that smart needs more than one of us looking for it!" Ani added.

Cal genuinely thought this was funny. He kept a snicker to himself while he listened.

"Hm. Guess you have a point." Natal chuckled. "But I can outsmart that bird. I've been planning for how to catch it all day; hence why dinner's a bit late."

"I get it," Striker said, nodding. "But if we help you make dinner, it'll be ready in no time!"

"Yeah!" All the rest of them cheered.

In Westopolis, by a massive graveyard, Johnny was sitting on top of a larger tombstone than the rest, holding a red and a blue gem in each hand. *...three* Chaos Emeralds *... Corruption... and spirits from the dead...* he thought, as he smirked. *With this kinda power... I feel like I can take on the world.*

In that instant, he heard an explosion, and could clearly see Callous being launched from somewhere. "The hell? We're being attacked?" he yelled, as he rushed towards where Callous landed.

When reaching Callous, she managed to push herself back up, looking back at the figurine lying on the ground in shock. *How did he do that?* she thought.

"Callous, what just happened?" Johnny asked the moment he reached her, before he glanced at the figurine as well. "...did Metal Sonic pull some kind of stunt?"

"Yeah, he did," she growled. "I was messing with him and when he got angry enough, that thing shot be back."

"...how the hell does that work?" Johnny uttered, as he placed the red Chaos Emerald by Callous, before picking up the figurine. "I'm

still thinking that destroying him before the fight is going to be a lot more beneficial for us than keeping on toying with him. What if he finds a way to reverse the flow, or something?"

Callous stood up and snatched the figurine out of Johnny's hand. "Unfortunately if we try to destroy him, things could fall apart more than they would now," she said. Then she suddenly noticed something in the figurine, and while looking at it, she suddenly could tell the next emotion that Metal was feeling.

And she grinned.

"...what's up, now?" Johnny inquired. "How's the tin can holding up?"

"...he's crying," she said, as her grin remained unchanged.

"...wait, what?" Johnny uttered with a baffled look. "Wait, I think I misheard that... did you say that Metal Sonic... was crying?"

"Like a baby!" Callous laughed. "And you wanna know something better? Jill's trying to comfort him!"

It took a while for Johnny to properly process that information. However, the moment it was processed, he roared with laughter. "Are you serious? The high and mighty Metal Sonic, crying his metallic heart out!" he laughed, as he sat down on a tombstone, trying to calm down. "That's the most pathetic thing I've heard in my entire life!"

"See Johnny? Even if we're not destroying him immediately, it looks like we're still breaking him down bit by bit," Callous said, tossing the figurine up and down casually. "And that's a more worthwhile way to do it." Catching the figurine, she suddenly noticed something else too. *Wait a minute...* she thought. *...is he crying...actual tears? Robots can't do that...* But she didn't want Johnny to ask about it, so she gave a shrug.

"Well, there's only a day left until the fight..." Johnny said, as he looked around him. "And even with the size of this graveyard, we've completely cleared it out! I thought that we'd have to spend more than just a few hours on this many spirits!"

"Well, there are always more graveyards to explore after all," Callous said. "And with all the spirits we'll absorb," she let out a chuckle, "Jill won't be able to beat me."

"Well, I don't see any reason why we should delay it much further." Johnny said, as he counted on his fingers. "Let's see... in this graveyard alone, we got... what, 500 spirits each? Who knows; if we step up our game, we'll have absorbed 10000 spirits each, and still have time left before the fight!"

Callous looked at Johnny who was sitting on a tombstone, and sauntered up to him. Then she leaned down to him and put a finger underneath his chin. "Actually, I can see one reason we could delay it a little."

"I get where you're going with this..." Johnny chuckled, before he gently pushed Callous' finger aside. "...but remember what I told you about that adrenaline rush? Even with the amount of spirits we've gotten already... if we get more, it'll be the wildest thing any of us will ever experience! How about it?"

"Hm..." Callous straightened up and put that finger to her lips while thinking about it. "...Well, it's hard to be patient, but I guess you've got a good point," she said.

"Trust me; it's gonna be worth it." Johnny said, as he walked over to the red Chaos Emerald, picking it up. "So, how about... five more graveyards, and we go at it?"

"Sure," Callous said, smiling deviously.

"Then it's settled." Johnny chuckled, as he approached Callous. "Now... what place is bound to have a large graveyard lying around?"

"Let's see..." Callous thought about it again. "...I think Future City is a pretty big place. Might have just as big a graveyard."

"Then that's where we're going next." Johnny chuckled. "Chaos Control!" In that instant, both of them vanished.

Future City's graveyard, on the outskirts of town. Anyone taking the train there would be able to see a glimpse of the graveyard, along with a large tree which a relatively small grave was resting under.

This night, however, a heavily-cloaked person was standing under that tree, looking down at the grave. *...what those guys were talking about...* the person thought. *...Deity Novagod... he managed to kill him, huh?*

In that instant, he heard something a short distance from him, which prompted him to look behind him.

"I still can't get used to Chaos Control..." Callous uttered, keeping her sickness at bay.

"It'll probably just take a while." Johnny reassured, as he brushed dust off his arms. "Well, now... where to begin?" As he said that, he placed one hand on a nearby tombstone, sucking out the spirit residing within.

Callous picked a tombstone herself, and she, herself, pulled out that spirit. Then she absorbed it with more ease than before, and afterward, she looked onto the next one.

Just as Johnny finished absorbing one spirit, he placed another hand on a different tombstone. "Child's play. We'll be done long before dawn breaks!" he chuckled.

At that point, however, the sound of a gun firing was heard, and Johnny quickly retracted his hand from the stone. "OW! Shit, someone shot my hand!" he yelled, as he held his hand in pain.

Callous paid no heed to Johnny's pain, but she was interrupted from beginning on the second tombstone, glancing over to where she heard gun fire. "Well, it seems we're not alone, Johnny," she mused.

Gritting his teeth, Johnny looked around him. "Alright, who the hell's there?"

"I could ask you the same question." a low voice uttered, as the two heard footsteps coming towards them. Soon, the two would see a person walking towards them, twirling a revolver in his left hand. The

most notable thing about him was not the hat and trenchcoat that covered his face and body, respectively, however, but the massive rifle hanging on his back.

"So, who are you, the grave-keeper?" Callous asked curiously.

"No. I'm a bounty hunter. Call me Lock." the stranger replied, as he stopped twirling his revolver around. "Now... who are you?"

"Ah, a bounty hunter, hm?" Callous chuckled in amusement. "Well, Lock...My name's Callous."

"And I'm Johnny." Johnny spat, as he waved his hand with an annoyed scowl.

"...hm. Relatives, perhaps..." Lock mused, as he glanced at Johnny.

"Relatives?" Johnny uttered, as he raised an eyebrow. "Wait... don't tell me... you know Jack?"

"I see no reason to tell you." Lock scoffed, before looking back at Callous. "What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't believe us if we told you," Callous said. "So why don't you just scurry away and leave us, huh Lock?" Obviously she was not intimidated by the bounty hunter in the least.

"Not until I get answers." Lock said, as he cracked his neck. "So cough them up."

"What if we don't?" Callous asked. "Are you intending to make us talk?"

"Unless you talk willingly." Lock said, as he aimed his revolver at Callous. "Otherwise, I'll have to resort to force."

"Tsch... cheeky bastard..." Johnny scoffed, as he glanced at Callous. "Want me to take care of him?"

"Nah, I can handle him," Callous said. Then she chuckled, "besides, you might get your other hand shot off."

"Hey, it's just a scratch, alright?" Johnny said, as he sat down on a tombstone. "Well, whatever. Might as well enjoy the show."

"So, you're not gonna talk." Lock presumed, without breaking his stance.

"It depends what you want to know, and whether or not you'll believe us if we tell you," Callous said, sitting down on a tombstone and crossing her legs.

"Just tell me what business you have here." Lock said, as he still kept his revolver trained on Callous. "I'm sure your reasons won't be too far-fetched."

"Would you call "soul-stealing" not too far-fetched?" Callous inquired in amusement.

"...elaborate." Lock said, as he tilted his head.

"In a short and sweet way, we have powers you'll fail to understand. Now recently the two of us; Johnny and I, discovered a new trick we could do," Callous explained briefly. "We can take souls and use their energy as we please." Then she folded her arms. "That good enough for you?" she asked him.

"...not really." Lock replied bluntly. "You're going to have to explain these "powers", if I'm going to take your claim seriously."

"I could show them, instead." Callous stood up and raised her arms, conjuring up black, pulsing energy to her palms. Then she smirked. "Like so." She flicked her hands and fired them at Lock.

However, Lock was agile enough to sidestep the incoming dark projectiles, without aiming the revolver away from Callous, while keeping a hand on his hat. "...that's it?" he said, before sighing. "How disappointing." Without a moment's hesitation, he pulled the trigger, sending a bullet rocketing towards Callous.

CHNNNG! The bullet ricocheted off of a shining surface, and Callous had her scythe in hand, having deflected the bullets lightning quick with it. "That's far from it, Lock," Callous said, chuckling. "You have no idea." She lurched forward to slice him with

the scythe.

Lock, however, was quicker, leaping back the moment she attempted to slice at him. Without a word, he fired four more bullets at Callous, emptying his revolver.

Again, Callous deflected the bullets with her scythe; all but the last one. It scratched her cheek, and she stepped back a moment. There was no blood, but black ooze instead, trickling down her cheek. But she was undaunted by it; she only continued to smirk. "That tickled," she said.

"...interesting." Lock hummed, as he began twirling his revolver around. In that instant, he quickly used his free hand to pull another revolver out from within his coat, before he began firing at Callous repeatedly.

This time, Callous purposely let the bullets his her, to a point where Lock would have to completely unload his second revolver on her. Most of the bullets hit her middle area, and like before, leaked with black ooze. Looking more closely, the six bullets pushed themselves out of the areas that they struck, and fell to the ground, as the black ooze "cleaned up," and Callous looked not to have a scratch on her.

"Got anything with more...oh, I don't know, firepower?" Callous asked mockingly.

"...quite a lot, actually." Lock said, looking pretty unaffected, in spite of his attacks having no effect. Then, he threw his left revolver up in the air, before taking something else out from his coat; a red bullet. "This, for instance." he added, as he loaded the bullet into the chamber of the revolver he still held, before grabbing the second revolver out from the air.

"What's that supposed to be? Armor-piercing rounds?" Johnny chuckled, as he raised an eyebrow.

"...not exactly." Lock replied, as he aimed the loaded revolver at Callous. "Armor-piercing, explosive rounds." Then, he pulled the trigger, sending the bullet straight at Callous.

Callous deflected it this time with her scythe, and since the bullet exploded on impact, it forced her backwards. Though she still kept on her feet, and started laughing. "Wow, that has quite a kick to it!" she said. "You're no ordinary gunslinger." The scythe departed and Callous instead summoned up her two whips. As soon as the Corruption seeped around it, she aimed one crack of her whip right on Lock's hand; intending to cripple the hand beyond firearm use.

However, Lock was quicker, leaping away from the crack of the whip. "It takes a lot of skill to be able to hunt high-level bounties." he replied, as he hid one of his revolvers on his person, before quickly reloading the second one, only with red bullets. "You seem like the kind of girl who'd have a high-level bounty." he added, as he opened fire on Callous.

Callous jumped away from each bullet this time, and the bullets blew chucks of the ground into the air. "Too bad I'm not well known enough to even HAVE a bounty," she said. "And even then, there's not anyone who could take me down." She sent her whips around a couple tombstones, and hurled them at Lock.

With surprising agility, however, Lock outran these attacks, as he pocketed his second revolver as well. "We'll see about that." Lock replied, just as he pulled a pair of machine pistols from his coat, firing at Callous as he ran around her.

Callous used fancy footwork to outmaneuver these bullets. She even did a round of back flips away from them, and in the final leap, she aimed her whip for one of the machine pistols; successfully yanking it out of Lock's grip, and leaving him only one.

In spite of that, Lock didn't seem all that affected, as he stopped running. Quickly, he removed the magazine, before inserting a new one into the pistol. "Let's see how you handle tracer rounds." he said, as he began firing at Callous again; this time, however, the bullets were visibly igniting, lighting fires wherever they landed.

"You sure are defiling a lot of graves," Callous remarked. She threw her whip over a tree branch and pulled herself up high into the air. While in midair, she brought back her scythe and twirled it like a baton, deflecting the fire rounds. Then as the blade radiated with

Corruption, she spun with a swing of her scythe, and sent a large slash wave of Corruption right for Lock; and it was a lot larger than it usually was. The key factor probably was the consumption of souls she had recently done.

Seeing the wave coming, Lock stopped firing, as he managed to leap out of the way in the nick of time, nimbly avoiding the wave of Corruption. "And consuming souls isn't?" he quipped, before hiding away his machine gun. "...hm. Guess it's time to let her have a go." he mused, before lifting the rifle off his back, aiming it at Callous.

"Come on; you're deliberately putting yourself at an disadvantage!" Johnny laughed, before looking at Callous. "Finish him, already; he's got nothing left!"

Callous plopped down on her feet, charging insanely quick at Lock. Then in order to cut Lock short, she slashed the scythe...right through his rifle. It cut in half like a hot knife through butter, and the barrel of it fell to the ground.

Seeing this, Johnny began laughing loudly. "What an idiot!" he yelled.

Lock, however, remained undaunted. "...well, now. This is new." In spite of its barrel having been sliced off, he pulled the trigger, releasing a burst of energy from the hole, and with Callous directly in front of him, she'd feel the explosive impact from it to be even stronger than the explosive bullet from before.

It blew her away alright, and she staggered back a moment, but she didn't look like she was hurt. It wasn't all that far from striking down Lock right then and there, so she took her scythe and prepared to-

"AAAAGH!"

That yell threw her off, as well as something flying right past her, nearly knocking her off her balance. "What the-?"

It turned out to be Gale on her gear, and she circled around Callous.

"Wait, who the hell?" Johnny uttered, as he watched Gale circle Callous.

"...you?" Lock uttered in mild surprise, though it wasn't over having been saved, but more at the spontaneous appearance of Gale that had thrown him off a bit.

"What? You think we couldn't tell by the numerous explosions going on here?" Gale asked Lock. Then she looked back at Callous. "...boy, you're a slut if I ever saw one."

Callous was surprised at a crack like that, and she got up on her feet, making no comment about it.

"Hey Punk, let's see if we can rough them up!" Gale said.

"Right behind ya!" In that instant, something clobbered the back of Johnny's head, as he was knocked off the tombstone he was sitting on, sending him face-first into the ground.

"Gnh... who did that?" Johnny growled, as he got on his feet, looking around him.

"I did!" Before Johnny could react, Punk passed right by him, taking the lion by surprise with a clothesline, knocking Johnny off his feet again. "Man, what a bunch of chumps!"

"...hm." Lock scoffed, as he began walking back a bit, picking up the barrel of his rifle. *I'll have to get this fixed later... but her other functions should still work.* he thought, as he pulled on a small lever on the side of the rifle.

Callous growled. "So...a couple of you kids want to play games, hm?"

"We ain't just kids, lady," Gale said. "We're the Babylon Rogues!"

"That doesn't mean anything to me," Callous said. Gripping her whip tightly, she waited until Gale was close enough and she wrapped the whip around her gear, yanking it out from under her feet.

"WHOA!" Gale tripped and tumbled onto the ground, not having expected that.

Getting up on his feet, Johnny wiped some dirt off his face, as he

looked around. "...where did he go?" he uttered, as Punk was gone from sight.

"Behind you!" Hearing that, Johnny instantly swung his arm behind him, but hit nothing but thin air. That left him open to be punched on the back of his head by Punk, who passed by him again. "Yo, Gale, you holding up over there?" Punk called, as he glanced at Gale and Callous.

In the meantime, Lock moved the lever on the rifle further, as he made sure to keep his eyes on Callous. *...now, if Gale could move aside...* he thought.

Gale got up, "I-"

"-should be quiet, if you know what's good for you." Callous snatched Gale up from behind.

"H-Hey! Let me go!" Gale said, trying to struggle.

"Should I?" Callous questioned irritably. "You got yourself into this mess, so you'd better be prepared to take any consequences that come along with it!"

Seeing that, Punk gritted his teeth. "Hey! Leave my sister alone!" he called, as he spun around, intending to rush at Callous.

"Oh, no, ya don't!" Before he could do that, however, Johnny suddenly delivered a powerful kick squarely at Punk's back, knocking him off his gear. Before the hawk could move, Johnny suddenly pinned him down. "Piece of cake..." he muttered, just as something dawned on him. "...hey! Why don't we just take the girl as a souvenir?" he said with a smirk.

Hearing that, Punk glared up at the lion. "You wouldn't dare!" he yelled.

Lock, in the meantime, looked at both Callous and Johnny. *...this is exactly why I hunt alone.* he thought, as he held a hand on the rifle's trigger. *...but if I fire now, Gale's going to be caught in it...*

Callous thought about it. "...you know, I would like to see if you could

take souls from *live* victims," she said, as she began to chuckle.

Gale's eyes widened. "What're you getting at?"

"Well, that'd be good practice, if you're gonna do the same to Jill, later on!" Johnny laughed.

Hearing that, Punk tilted his head. "...Jill?" he said, recalling the name from when Brick and the others had talked to Jet earlier.

"Come on, Callous, do it!" Johnny called, as he looked up at Callous.

"Callous?" Punk uttered, as he looked up at Gale. "...shit! Let go of her!"

...damn. Gritting his teeth, Lock quickly dug a hand into his coat, before pulling out the machine pistol; the one with the tracer rounds. Aiming at Callous, he immediately opened fire, intending to catch her off guard.

"Wha?" Callous actually had let her guard down, so Lock's shot jolted her, setting Gale free.

"Quick, Lock!" Gale screamed, scurrying away. "SHOOT HER DOWN!"

"Don't yell at me." Lock said in a cold tone, as he quickly dropped the machine pistol, before aiming his rifle at Callous, just as Gale got out of the line of fire. "Adios." In that instant, the rifle shot out a gigantic, continuous wave of energy, which rocketed right at Callous.

Punk could only watch the massive wave shoot at the ewe in awe. "...woah. I didn't think his rifle could do that..." he uttered.

Callous, even aflame as she was because of the tracer rounds, was able to jump aside, letting the wave fire away from her. "Alright, now you've officially pissed me off!" she yelled. She darted around so fast that the naked eye would miss her if it blinked, and she wormed her way to the point she stood right behind Lock, and with Corruption built up in her hand, she jabbed it right through his back.

"Lock?" Gale uttered in shock.

Being attacked like that, Lock let go of the rifle, letting the wave die out, as it fell to the ground.

"...LOCK!" Punk screamed, as he tried getting out of Johnny's grip, to no avail.

However, even with Callous' hand through his back, Lock didn't seem to be in pain at all. "...that... tickles." he said in a semi-mockingly tone, mimicking Callous' line from earlier. Then, he suddenly pulled a revolver out from his coat, turning around so that he aimed squarely at Callous' head. "Farewell." he said, before pulling the trigger, firing an explosive bullet right at the ewe.

What they saw was the equivalent of Callous' head exploding as well as being thrown backwards, and black ooze splattered everywhere. Gale covered her mouth to keep from losing her lunch at the sight of such gore. It even looked like Callous had been thoroughly defeated...

...but the black ooze that was in puddles everywhere, crawled its way back to the body, and gathered around where the head used to be. Once it was all there, the gooey glob began building up on the shoulders, and the body sat up.

"Oh...my...god..." Gale uttered in horror.

The glob of black goo on the shoulders took its shape, and eventually morphed itself back into Callous' head. When the transformation was complete, Callous opened her eyes and glared at Lock angrily as she stood up.

"...huh." Lock uttered, without breaking his stance. "That usually leads to death."

"It does..." Johnny chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "...in this case, yours!"

The moment Johnny said that, however, Punk saw an opportunity. "YAH!" Quickly, he managed to kick the lion off him, before running towards Callous and Lock. "Come on, Gale, let's split!" he yelled, as

he took something out from his pockets, which he hurled down at the ground. What the object was, neither Callous, Johnny or Lock could tell, but the moment it struck the ground, a massive blanket of smoke covered pretty much the entire graveyard.

Callous closed her eyes to keep the smoke from getting in them, but she simply stood there calmly and patiently, despite how irritated she was right now.

However, when the smoke lifted, her patience would prove to be a mistake; as it turned out, Punk, Gale and Lock were gone, leaving only Callous and Johnny in the graveyard.

"...figures..." she grumbled, sitting back down on the tombstone.

"Shit... that guy really gave you a run for your money." Johnny muttered, as he walked towards Callous. "He even managed to shoot you while you got him with Corruption. Even I gotta admit, he's tough."

Callous said nothing, and turned her head away.

"Hey, come on, you still got him!" Johnny said, as he stopped next to Callous. "Tough or not, he's still gonna die from having Corruption consume him, so in the end, you won. 'sides, we still got the whole graveyard to take care of."

Callous still remained silent.

"...Callous?" Tilting his head, Johnny knelt by her, looking at her with a confused expression. "Come on, tell me what's bugging you."

"...nothing's bugging me," Callous answered, still not looking at him. "I'm just really pissed."

"Aah..." Johnny nodded; admittedly, he hadn't seen Callous be so angry to the point where she seemed tranquil, but he decided not to ask further questions. "...maybe reaving some souls will make you feel better?" he tried, as he placed a hand on a tombstone.

"...you go ahead," Callous replied. "I need a minute."

"...alright." Johnny nodded, as he began pulling the spirit of the tombstone he held out, absorbing it, before moving on to the next tombstone.

Callous' issue was that she had held back when fighting Lock, and allowed them to get away like that. She had grown so over confident that it was affecting the way she fought. Part of her felt that if this issue had gone unnoticed, she may lose in her battle against Jill. After a moment, she made a solemn vow to herself. *Jill, when our battle comes, I will not hold back...* she promised in thought. *You're as good as dead.*

Chapter 65

CHAPTER – SIXTY-FIVE

"Phew... that was a close one." Punk muttered, as he leaned against a wall. He, Gale and Lock had gotten a fair distance away from the graveyard, around the other side of the city. "But at least we got away from those freaks, huh?" he said, as he glanced at Gale. "...you alright?"

"I'm okay," Gale answered. "It's just...I can't believe THAT was Callous!" After all the things that Brick and his gang told them about her, seeing that she existed for real was quite a startling thing.

"Sheesh..." Punk muttered. "No pleasant dreams for me in the coming weeks..." As he spoke, he glanced at Lock, who was also leaning against the same wall, though he was completely silent. "...the bigger question is, are you alright, Lock?"

Lock, however, was silent.

"...Lock?" Gale uttered.

"...h-hey, Lock, say something!" Punk said, laughing nervously, as he approached the bounty hunter. "Just let us know that you're-" In that instant, Lock suddenly swung his fist at Punk, sending the hawk staggering away from him. "...ow! What was that for?"

"...for getting in my way." Lock muttered, as he glared at both Punk and Gale. "Don't do that again."

Gale flinched at Lock's glare, and cleared her throat nervously. "...but in all seriousness, Lock...she didn't hurt you that bad, did she?" she asked.

Lock, however, didn't say anything, as he began walking away.

"Hey!" Punk called, which made Lock stop. "Gale just asked you a question! You could at least answer it!"

"...remember when I said that her attack only tickled?" Lock said, as he glanced back at the two hawks.

"Oh..." Gale muttered.

"...well..." Punk said, as he scratched the back of his head. "That's good to know! Well, I guess we'll see you-"

"I lied." Lock interrupted, as he looked away from the hawks. "It hurts like hell." In that instant, he collapsed.

"Lock!" Gale rushed to his side immediately.

Punk, too, rushed towards Lock's side.

"...I don't know what she did..." Lock uttered, though strangely, there wasn't a single trace of pain in his speech at all. "...but it's tearing me apart from within."

Gale looked up at Punk worriedly. "...we can't just leave him here, Punk."

"...you're right." Punk said, as he tried getting Lock on his feet, though the bounty hunter pushed him away.

"Just leave me." Lock uttered, as he tried getting up on his own, though it was to no avail. "There's nothing you can do."

"We can at least try helping ya!" Punk protested, as he glanced at Gale. "Listen, you have to find someplace Lock can rest! I'll try to find those guys from before!"

Gale's sight fell on something behind Punk, and her jaw dropped. Tugging on Punk to get his attention, she pointed, "Punk, look!"

"What?" Blinking, Punk looked behind him, just as Lock happened to glance in that direction.

A tall cloaked figure walked to them from the darkness. Gale stood up. "Who are you?" This got a look from the cloaked figure, but didn't say anything as they continued to walk to them; mostly Lock.

"...answer us!" Punk said, as he quickly got in front of Lock. "Who the hell are-" Before he could continue, Lock pushed the hawk aside, looking at the cloaked figure in silence.

The figure knelt down by Lock, as Gale distanced herself away from the figure. "Where has she struck you down?" The figure asked; revealing itself to be a woman.

"...the back." Lock replied, as he looked at the woman. "...who are you?"

"Someone who can help," the woman observed Lock's back. Somehow as Punk and Gale couldn't see before, there had been a hole burned through in the trench coat, and black energy pulsing through it.

"What is that?" Gale asked, more horrified.

"It is called Corruption," The woman said. "It is an energy of the darkness that destroys one from the inside out."

Gale gave the woman a shocked look. "...how do you know about that?"

The woman didn't answer, while she pressed her hand against Lock's wound, and it began to radiate with a pure, white glow.

Lock remained silent, as he closed his eyes, letting the woman proceed with her treatment.

"Wait... then what's that light, then?" Punk said, as he tilted his head.

Lock felt a slight amount of more pain while she worked, but the black energy deteriorated. Then Punk and Gale saw that when the white glow was gone, the hand was burned. Gale looked at Lock's back, and with the exception of a strange mark, it was healed. "Whoa..."

"...what the hell...?" Punk uttered in awe.

Lock, however, was still silent, as he stood up, before looking at the woman. "...thank you."

The woman regarded a nod to Lock, and turned to walk away, only to be stopped by Gale. "Hang on a minute! You haven't answered any of our questions!"

"You should not have tried to confront Callous," the woman said, which made Gale jump. "A power as unnatural as Corruption can only be fought with one other power." The woman turned back to them, and pulled off the hood of her cloak, showing her face to them. It was Goddess. "And you do not possess that power."

"...the hell? She looks kinda like Callous!" Punk uttered, as he stepped back in surprise.

"..." Without a word, Lock walked closer to Goddess, stopping in front of her. "...where are you headed?" he asked.

"Wait, where'd that question come from, all of a sudden?" Punk said in disbelief.

"I am to return to my duties," Goddess answered Lock.

"Wait a minute..." Gale wondered if possibly this woman could be... "...you're Jill aren't you?"

Goddess could only look at Gale.

"Wait, she's Jill?" Punk uttered, as he looked from Gale to Goddess. "...wait! So Callous is planning on sucking out her soul?"

With a brief glance at the hawks, Lock looked back at Goddess. "...I'm in your debt, so... do you need any help?"

"And what's with those kinda questions?" Punk sputtered again.

Goddess was still affected by Gale's mentioning of Jill, and she simply turned away to leave.

Gale tried to stop her. "Jill, where are you-"

"-Jillian is my daughter," Goddess interrupted, which was plenty to silence Gale again. "And unfortunately...I do not have the right to ask for any aid in my duties..."

"Wait, what's that supposed to mean?" Gale asked.

"...my daughter's hardships were my fault," she said, with a sigh of disdain.

Punk was clueless. "...eh?"

"...still, I need to repay you somehow, for saving my life." Lock said. "Do you want me to keep an eye on your daughter for you?"

"No, she is already taken care of," Goddess answered, without looking back at them. "If you truly wish to help, however, you can do so, by ensuring that Callous does not harm my daughter's friends. Jillian is not in a position to help them, and Callous has the tendency to complicate things." Then she glanced at Lock. "And If you see her friends again, please do not tell them you have seen me."

"...I won't, ma'am." Lock said with a nod.

"...sheesh, Lock's treating her really respectfully..." Punk muttered, before shaking his head. "So, what's your name, then?"

"My name is Goddess," she answered, walking away again, though this time hopefully without any more interruptions. "And I trust you two with the same secret." In a blink, she was gone.

Gale stood there blankly, but inside she was a little scared. "...that was kinda creepy, the way she appeared and disappeared like that," she said.

"Yeah..." Punk nodded, though in that instant, Lock began walking off. "Hey! Where are you going?"

"...I'm going to find her friends." Lock said, without stopping. "If Callous plans on targeting them, I'll be there to halt her."

"But you don't even know where they live!" Gale tried to reason.

"And besides, your rifle's broken!" Punk called. "I don't think you can turn it into an Extreme Gear like that!"

"I'll find them eventually." Lock said, before looking at the two

hawks. "If you want to stop me, go ahead and try."

"Well, I mean...it's not that we're trying to stop you," Gale said. "But they're going to come back to town tomorrow...shouldn't you wait until then?"

"...with Callous loose, I can't wait." Lock said, as he kept walking. "But I'll find them; I'll just follow the train tracks."

"...stubborn guy, he is..." Punk muttered, before sighing. "Don't get yourself killed!"

"...the same goes to you." Lock said back, as he waved to the two hawks.

Gale was silent, and then she called out to him again. "Look around Mystic Ruins! You might find them there!"

"...thanks for the tip." Lock called, before he went out of sight.

"...man..." Punk muttered, as he folded his arms. "I didn't think that Lock would be the kinda guy that'd feel indebted for being saved at all..."

"I didn't even think there was someone who could beat Lock," Gale said, shuddering a little. "Brick and his friends were right...Callous was kinda scary."

"Yeah..." Punk nodded, as he folded his arms. "Whoever's training Jill to take out Callous better be one hell of a good coach."

"C'mon, let's get out of here before they decide to come after us," Gale said, taking Punk by the hand.

The mists again. This time, I patiently awaited for them to fade away, and I opened my eyes to find myself in yet another strange place. I had expected for Deity to come and harass me in my dreams again, but I was not in any setting of dark misery. No, this place was some sort of courtyard. It was blooming with many spring flowers in its garden, and I was awed by such a tranquil beauty that

was rarely seen in my days.

But it was not the garden that took my breath away. It was the tall towers before me that gleamed with the moonlight that caught my eye.

"A castle...?"

"Hm?" Silver opened his eyes. For awhile, he couldn't really sleep, and he had been trying to for the past half hour, but hearing that murmur he sat up and looked around. The first thing he saw was Jill shifting in movement, and then mumbles.

I entered through its gates to explore, and while I was curious, I was also a little scared. Each of my dreams were always different, but all the same unpredictable. I hoped that it wouldn't be Deity that I would see. In fact, I wished that it would be Sonic or one of his friends...

"...Sonic...are you here?" Jill mumbled.

Silver cocked his head strangely. "Sonic?"

Even with these mumbles, Metal didn't seem to notice, as his eyes were closed, whilst he was sitting with his back against the wall.

Seeing Metal that way, Silver turned back to Jill, curious to see if she would say anything else.

The chambers were gargantuan, and the maze of halls twisted and turned so much that I was hopelessly lost in a manner of minutes. What was I doing here? The places I were taken to in my dreams had meanings, and no doubt that this place had its own meaning, but it was not apparent at the moment. I reached one very large chamber; like some sort of ballroom. The only light was from the moonlight outside of the tall windows, leaving moon beams across half the ballroom.

I saw a figure sitting there near the windows, and its silhouette was indistinguishable.

"Who...are you...?" Jill whispered, which Silver heard as well to more confusion.

Then Silver heard something outside the mouth of the cave, like the rustling of bushes. Alarmed, he stood up.

Still, Metal remained unmoved by the noise.

Since Metal didn't stir, Silver stepped outside to investigate for himself, leaving Metal and Jill alone.

Meanwhile, Jill continued to dream.

The figure rose into the air suddenly, and turned around. Thankfully, it was not Deity. However it was not someone I recognized right away. He was small, and had tiny wings and large ears, and he fluttered up to me. "Hi," he said with a friendly voice. He looked like some sort of tiny, maroon-colored dog with a tuft of white fur on his head.

"...Hi?" I replied questionably. "Who are you?"

"Call me Chip," the dog replied, smiling. "I've watched you for a long time, Jill, and I can't say how impressed I am."

"Chip?" I recognized the name, but I couldn't recall where. "...Wait, you say you've been watching me?" I asked.

Chip nodded. "I'm sure Metal Sonic told you that your power came from my power."

My eyes widened in realization. "You're Light Gaia, aren't you?" I knew I recognized the name. The Professor's story of Dark Gaia; Chip had been the nickname Sonic gave him when he couldn't remember who he was. "...Why did you come to see me?" I asked again.

"I want to warn you of something..." Chip said to me. "...You also know that Deity is free, right?"

I nodded again.

"...Deity Novagod...he stole Knuckles' spirit..." Chip uttered regretfully.

"...No..." I uttered. This has happened before. I was also fully aware that Deity had powers over spirits, and I had seen him take a few myself...but this news was not good. "...how?"

"Knuckles' body was still on Angel Island," Chip tried to explain. "The bodies, even deceased, still have a small, fragile connection to the soul. Corruption has that ability to channel through that body, and reach the soul." He looked up at me. "And he absorbed it."

"...Knuckles..." that was a hard hit toward me. "...but, that means that if he took his soul, then his body..." I was horrified at that realization. Whenever Deity absorbed the life energy of someone, then he could manipulate their body like a puppet; whether they are dead or not.

Chip nodded, and it was apparent that he knew this knowledge. "If Deity Novagod can control the Guardian of the Master Emerald...then Angel Island might be in danger..."

"No..." I fell to my knees and held my head. I didn't want this to happen! "No!"

Jill awoke, but didn't move at all. "...Knuckles..." she shut her eyes and tried not to cry, but the tears seeped through anyway, running down her cheeks. "Oh no..."

Metal, however, still did not move, even while hearing Jill's crying. He was having some sort of dream of his own.

I found myself standing in, what I could only assume was a swamp. Given the trees surrounding me, along with the thick fog, there wasn't much else I could fathom to guess. However, I didn't find anything wrong with the footing underneath me... perhaps this was just a forest.

This scenery, however, perplexed me. I've never seen anything like it before, so why would I be here in the first place? Shrugging, I walked past the trees, looking around me. For some reason... I couldn't help but feel that I was being watched.

"So you're the one they call Metal Sonic..." a voice resonated in the

fog; a voice that I didn't recognize.

Blinking, I stopped walking, as I looked around me. "...who's there?" I said, keeping my cool.

An area of the fog darkened and swirled around, creating a figure. It was a black Mobain bat with long white hair, garbed like a 17th century Victorian. He looked at me with his lifeless, pale purple eyes. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said, with a small bow.

"I am Deity Novagod."

Hearing that name, I blinked. Here he was; the very same being who had gotten my nemesis killed. If I could, I would have gutted him here and now, to put an end to all this...

...but even I knew that I couldn't just yet. "...you're Novagod, huh?" I said, folding my arms. "I've heard quite a lot about you."

"I can only assume that you have," Deity said. "From what I've been able to gather, you are assisting Jillian to ensure my demise, correct?"

"...you could say that." I replied, looking at the bat defiantly. He had this air around him, that I couldn't quite describe... but even I found it a bit unnerving. Still, I didn't show any signs of panic, as I kept looking straight at him. "You wouldn't happen to have a problem with that, now, would you?"

"I feel indifferent to it," he said. "Though I must admit it is quite a turn of events she consulted your help. It is...unusual."

"...you could say that." I shrugged. "But she did not request my help; she merely accepted it." Then, my gaze darkened. "Because I have a vendetta against you myself, Novagod."

"The reason being my taking of the life of the one you call "Sonic the Hedgehog," I presume?" Deity supposed.

I nodded. "That was my primary objective, and as you can imagine..." I began, before I closed my eyes. "...I'm not too happy about that."

"Oh, but I couldn't have imagined that. I have no emotion," Deity answered. "None the less, I wouldn't have cared."

"...well, I'll give you a reason to care." I said, as I opened my eyes. "Once Jill takes care of your little creation, I'm coming right after you. You should prepare yourself, because unlike her... I have absolutely no qualms about killing anyone."

"You put much faith in her, in seems," Deity murmured. "Unfortunately, however, her death is soon."

Hearing that, my eyes widened. "...what did you just say?" I uttered. Jill's death was... no! No, she can't die! What was Novagod going on about?

"I have the ability to foresee the deaths of others; with the exception of my own death, and yours too, since you do not possess a soul," Deity explained. "It is with that reasoning that I foresee her death in the near future." Then he gave me a sharp look. "Possibly in that battle between the two of them."

"...no..." I uttered in disbelief. After all the training I had put her through... she was still going to die? "...how?" I finally asked, as I looked down at the ground. "How is she going to die? Can you see that?"

"That is never specified," Deity answered. "I can only comprehend the time, and if I were lucky, the place. Cause of death can always change depending on the events that occur up to then."

"...is that so..." I uttered. Would it really come to it? Would I have to cut down Jill? The very thought made me uneasy, though I still did not show the vampire that. "...you just wait." I said, as I glared at him. "Jill or no Jill, I'll still take you down. Consider that my primary objective from now on."

"It will be interesting, Metal Sonic," Deity said. "Since I cannot predict either of our own deaths, it should be a suspenseful experience."

"...I may not be a fortune teller, but I can give you my prediction." I

said, as I drew my thumb across my neck. "Whatever you bleed, it's going to be a bloodbath."

"I shall allow you to think that, however we will see when the time comes," Deity said. After having said that, he began to vanish within the black fog he appeared from.

In that instant, Metal Sonic woke up, as he held his head. *...did I... dream?* he thought. Just then, he noticed Jill crying across from him. *"...Jill? What's wrong?"*

Jill had been sitting there crying ever since she woke up, and hearing Metal, she looked up at him with teary eyes. "It's Knuckles," she said. "Deity took his soul..."

"...what?" Metal uttered. After his dream, he didn't exactly want to think about Deity, but this... *"...but how? We saw Knuckles earlier; he was with Sonic, Amy, Rouge, the Chaotix... how could Deity have taken his soul?"*

"Chip visited me in a dream...told me that Knuckles' body was still on Angel Island, and that bodies, even dead, had a tiny fabric of a connection to their soul..." Jill buried her face in her hands again. "...Deity used Knuckles' dead body to get to his soul, and he's absorbed it to use his life energy for himself..."

"...but... when did he do that?" Metal said, as he approached Jill. *"It was only a few days ago when we saw Knuckles, back in the Special Zone! Did he decide to take Knuckles' soul after that?"*

"I don't know!" Jill let out another sob in her hands. "If he's absorbed Knuckles' soul, then he has control over his dead body! Chip told me that Angel Island could be in danger if Deity could control the Guardian of the Master Emerald!"

"...but why wait until now?" Metal uttered. *"If he had killed Knuckles all those years ago, why would he wait until now to absorb his soul?"* Then, he closed his eyes. *"Damn it... and we can't even get to Angel Island..."*

Jill didn't reply. Right now, she didn't know what to do.

"He didn't get the chance to absorb Knuckles' soul because someone else stopped him."

Jill's head shot up at that voice, and she even jumped to her feet, whirling around. "...Dad?"

Sure as pie, Silver was walking back with Ray Condit walking beside him, entering into the cave. "I heard something outside while the two of you were sleeping," Silver began to explain to them. "I found him wandering around, saying he was lost, and then said something about looking for Jill." Then he looked to Jill. "I didn't know he was your father."

"...father...?" Metal uttered, as he got to his feet, looking at Ray with a baffled look. *"...just what do you mean?"* he inquired.

"Goddess found the scene, and attempted to stop Deity from killing Knuckles," Ray told Metal. "She couldn't do that, but she was successful in stopping him from stealing his soul, only because the others were coming. At the time, Deity tried to be as strictly secret as possible, and while he could've hidden somewhere nearby without Knuckles' friends noticing, there was also the case with the Master Emerald. It was sealing Angel Island away so that no one else could get to it, and Deity was forced to either stay there for possibly an eternity, or forget Knuckles and escape to the outside world. Clearly you could figure which choice he went with."

Jill looked at her own father in shock. "...How do you know this?"

"Because your mother told me herself, Jillian," Ray said.

"You mean...you knew those things all along?" Jill questioned.

"No, I had no idea. I only came to know these things recently..." Ray looked at his daughter deeply. "...because your mother's spirit contacted me."

"...she contacted you..." Metal uttered, as he clenched his hands into fists. *"...but why would she not contact Jill?"*

"Because she was ashamed," Ray replied. "She feels that it was her fault that all those horrible things happened to Jillian. Goddess

doesn't even think she has the right to speak to her..."

"...what do you mean, Dad?" Jill asked sadly.

"She knew Deity long before you were born," Ray began. "She didn't come from the village you were born in, but where she came from, she never told me. All I knew was that she appeared in our village one day seeking shelter, and eventually came to live in it."

"But Goddess came to me last night. She confessed to me that she had been hiding so much from me, and Jillian. She said it was partly to protect us, and also because...she couldn't bear to think of the things in her past."

"You mean...Deity tortured Mom, like he did to me?" Jill asked.

"No. On the contrary..." Ray turned away. "...she was in love with him."

"...you can't be serious." Metal uttered in disbelief.

"I wish I were joking," Ray continued. "And it was like that at first. Then she found out what kind of fiend Deity was, and it was a struggle ever since. She tried to stay true to the righteous things she believed in but at the same time Deity Novagod manipulated her by her heartbroken feelings. Eventually it came to the point where Goddess simply ran away from him, and hoped to never see him again. It was eating her on the inside as time passed, to a point where she barely had the strength to give birth to Jillian before she died."

"...so she wants to rectify her mistake by taking down Deity from beyond the grave?" Metal supposed.

"Exactly," Ray said. "But judging by her state when she came to me...she still doesn't have the power to do it."

"What?" Jill tugged on Ray's arm. "Dad, what do you mean by that?"

"I can only say that your mother was a mess, Jillian," Ray said, trying not to look at her. "Even with what the Master Emerald could do to souls, she tried to go in there and fight Deity, but he had too

much of an upper hand. She fled...and came to me." Then he finally looked at her. "And now she's off again, wandering and "performing her duty" as she calls it."

"...just wait a minute here." Metal uttered, as he glared at Ray. *"She was the one who told me to throw Deity up on Angel Island in the first place... so if she knew that Knuckles' body still was there, why didn't she tell me, so we could have avoided that event to begin with?"*

"...she believes that the Master Emerald is a key to his defeat," Ray answered. "She said it could be incredibly risky, but...it could somehow disable him in some ways. Even then, she said she wasn't sure...that she was simply believing..."

"And now Deity controls the guardian of that damn gem!" Metal suddenly snapped, as he grabbed Ray. *"I sure hope that you know where Goddess went, because I have quite a few words I want to share with her!"*

"Metal, let him go!" pleaded Jill.

"Knuckles can be saved," Ray said suddenly, looking back at Metal sharply.

"...how?" Metal growled, as he let go of Ray. *"Deity has his soul, so unless he's killed..."*

"There's Chaos, the God of Destruction," Ray said.

"...funny that you should mention him; he actually lives downstairs." Metal replied. *"But what can he do to help Knuckles?"*

"Really?" Ray was amazed by that, but got to the point. "Chaos has the same connection to the Master Emerald...even if he can't communicate it to others, he may know what went wrong. The only reason he hadn't done so before was because there was no real way he could return to Angel Island without an air craft, and since it disappeared...well, it was lost cause. Who knows; maybe Chaos can figure out a way to use the Master Emerald against Deity."

"...but until then, we don't know if Deity just decides to have

Knuckles' body shatter the emerald, and escape." Metal said, before groaning. *"If Goddess would have just told me that Knuckles' body was there, I could have gotten him out while discarding the black emerald..."*

"Goddess told me that Deity was waiting..." Ray said.

"...for what?" Jill asked.

"She was never told what, other than he was waiting for the right time, when no one could stop him," Ray answered.

"...he's going to have to wait quite a while for that, though." Metal said, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. *"We'll stop him... right, Jill?"*

"Right," Jill said, nodding. "We'll beat him, just like we'll beat Callous."

Ray smiled at his daughter's enthusiasm.

"Oh, I'll make sure that Deity's defeat will be much grander than Callous' defeat; after all, both of us are going to have a shot at him then." Metal chuckled; even with Deity's prediction lingering in the back of his mind, Metal was dead-set on getting Jill through it alive.

"...I suppose I should leave you, so that you can continue your training without any more disturbance," Ray said.

Jill came over and hugged him. "I'll miss you Dad."

Ray held her closely, and then let her go, turning and leaving.

Silver had been incredibly speechless up until then. "...so that's it? He's just leaving like that?"

"He's always like that," Jill said.

"Hm." Metal nodded, as he leaned against a wall, before looking out of the cave, up at the sky. *...Goddess... why didn't you tell me? I was right there...* he thought.

"Well, we should try and get back to sleep," Silver said.

"...yes, maybe so." Metal nodded, as he sat down against the wall again, before closing his eyes. *"Good night, you two."*

"Good night," Jill replied, lying down on her pile of leaves and closing her own eyes.

Dinner was eaten fairly quickly, and it seemed like the gang was pretty tired after having gone to Future City. The kids already tucked in for the night, and Cal was just setting up the couch to sleep on.

"Getting ready for bed?" he'd hear Natal say, as she was walking down the hall, already wearing her pajamas.

"Yeah," Cal answered. "But strangely enough...I'm not that tired yet."

"Well, we did spend a good chunk of the day in bed, though." Natal chuckled. "I'll try to catch some shut-eye; if it doesn't work, I'll go outside and practice my sword-arm for a bit."

"You do that," Cal said. "I might stay awake and...I don't know, patrol the area or something..."

"That sounds like a plan." Natal said with a smile, as she continued walking down the hall. "See you tomorrow."

Cal watched her walk away. "...see ya..."

For a moment, Cal was all on his own by the couch, when... *"...is something wrong, Uncle Cal?"*

"Hm?" He didn't jump this time like he usually did, and he looked over at Tails Doll. "Oh, nothing's wrong Tails Doll." he said.

"You sure?" Tails Doll inquired, as he perched himself on top of Cal's head, looking down at the monkey. *"Nothing at all?"*

"Well, I'm not sure," Cal answered in honesty. "I mean...after one day, suddenly everyone's talking to me normally. I'm not used to

something like that at all, it feels weird...I thought it would take longer for the others to talk to me after the things I did to them..."

"Well..." Tails Doll hummed, as he tilted his head. *"...maybe it's the same thing for you as it's for Big Bro? Everyone's not that mad over what he did before, from what I gathered."*

"And I'm wondering why..." Cal murmured. "...I mean, for the kids like Striker, Milo, and even Jack, I can understand if they want to start talking to me, but Whisker? It still looks like Brick has issues with me, but he even talked to me without insulting me...and then there's Natal." Cal held his tongue there.

"...what about Natal?" Tails Doll inquired. *"Is it something you don't want the others to hear?"*

"Well...I mean, Natal was really nice to me..." Cal said bashfully. "...and I kinda like her...but it's complicated...and embarrassing to talk about."

"Aah..." Tails Doll said, as he nodded. *"Well, if you need to get something off your chest, you can talk to me!"*

"...thanks Tails Doll," Cal said. "I really appreciate that."

"No problem, Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll said, before fluttering off Cal's head. *"Good night!"* Then, he fluttered down the hall.

Once Tails Doll was gone, Cal didn't go to bed. He still wasn't tired yet, and so he made his way through the halls in the opposite direction Tails Doll had gone, reaching the balcony outside where he could get some fresh air.

As he was overlooking the area, he'd spot something in the distance, which seemed to be approaching the Clubhouse.

Cal searched through his mechanical devices once he saw it. The readings picked it up as a life form. Then he was afraid that it might be Callous, so he checked to see if he could sense any Corruption. To his relief, he sensed none of it and he let go from holding his breath.

So he leaped over the railing, and fell all the way to the jungle floor, drawing out his katanas. "Who's there?" he called.

However, there was no reply.

"I know you're out there," Cal called again.

Still, there wasn't any reply.

Cal's grip on his katanas tightened. "Come out! Show me who you are!"

Again, there wasn't any reply.

Cal smacked his head for being so stupid then. *What am I doing yelling out and giving away my postion?* he thought. *I'm supposed to be like a damn ninja!* So he activated his cloaking device and leaped up into the trees, hiding to see if whoever was out here would come out.

However, even as he waited, no one came out of hiding at all.

He jumped down from the trees then and deactivated his cloaking. "...where the hell is he?" Cal murmured, scratching his head.

At that point, he'd feel something being pressed against the back of his head. "Right behind you."

Cal did not like how this was going. He had a good feeling what was being pointed at the back of his head, and he also recognized that voice. "Lock the Sniper," he said, with a solemn look on his face. "What's a bounty hunter like you doing here?"

"...I have my reasons." Lock uttered, without moving the object away from Cal. "Now, tell me... does Brick Cainfield live in this area?"

Cal's changed from serious to bewildered. "...yeah? Why?"

"...good. That makes this a whole lot easier." Lock said, as he removed the object away from Cal. "By the way, if I had been hunting you, you would have been dead the moment you first called out to me. Be more cautious."

Cal scoffed at that. Again, he still had some things to work on. "...but why are you looking for Brick?" He asked, turning around to Lock.

Looking at Lock, Cal would come to see that what Lock had aimed at him was not a gun of any sort, but the sliced-off barrel of his rifle. "I'm assigned to look out for him, and his friends." he said bluntly.

"...okay," Cal murmured. "...and should I know what happened to your rifle?"

"You don't need to concern yourself over that." Lock said, as he hid the barrel within his coat. "How she ended up in this condition is my business."

"...well everyone's asleep as far as I'm concerned," Cal began, as he turned and walked. "But I can take you to where they live."

"I'd appreciate that." Lock nodded, as he followed Cal.

It wasn't very long at all until they stopped before the towering tree house. "Here it is," Cal said.

"...not bad." Lock hummed, as he observed the treehouse. "Someone must have put a lot of time into building this."

"I'm sure they had the help of Professor Prower to built this thing," Cal said, looking over at Lock. Then he noticed the hole in his trench coat, and the markings on his back. He knew the markings, and he looked at Lock wide eyed. "...you ran into Callous, didn't you?"

"...you know her as well?" Lock inquired, as he glanced at Cal.

Cal turned away. "I know her in ways I regret..." he mumbled.

"Hm." Lock nodded, before looking back at the treehouse. "I ran into her in Future City. They were apparently going to claim souls to use them as power. I fought her for a while... but not even a bullet to the head killed her. A most perplexing woman..."

"Well, she *is* the undead..." however something else Lock said suddenly struck Cal. "Wait a minute! Did you say she was claiming souls? When could she do that?"

"You're asking the wrong person for that." Lock shrugged, as he closed his eyes. "Though, that energy she controlled... Corruption, wasn't it? I'm pretty sure that it has something to do with that ability of hers."

"Corruption..." Cal turned away from Lock, and looked at his own hand. A faint black energy appeared calmly above his palm. "...there's a lot that most of us don't understand about Corruption. I knew it was capable of paranormal heights, but I didn't know just how high..."

"...hm." Lock hummed, as he began walking towards the treehouse. "Let's get inside; it's getting late."

Seeing Lock walking toward it, Cal sighed. *Things just get more complicated as time passes,* he thought, following Lock soon after.

Chapter 66

CHAPTER – SIXTY-SIX

"How many does this make now...?" Johnny muttered, just as he finished absorbing yet another spirit, before he scratched the back of his neck. *...wonder if Callous has gotten over the fight against Lock yet...* he thought, as he placed his hand on another tombstone. *If not, I'll end up taking all the souls here before she can get underway.*

Well, having your head blown off wasn't the most pleasant thing for Callous, but eventually she had gotten over it. In fact, unknown to Johnny, she had already gotten to work taking all the souls from the half of the cemetery that Johnny had not yet reached. She was on her way back to Johnny after he sucked out the soul from the tombstone he was currently on. "I've gotten the other half already," she said.

Hearing that got Johnny to look at her with a surprised look. "That was pretty quick." he noted, just as he let go of the tombstone. "Well, that marks one graveyard down."

"And a few more to go," Callous added.

"Alright, we've gotten part of Angel Island, Westopolis, Future City..." Johnny hummed, as he scratched his chin in thought. "...where to next, Callous?"

"There's Station Square," Callous mentioned. "But other then that, I can't think of any other places at the moment."

"...it may be a long shot..." Johnny muttered, as he grinned. "...and there may not be as many spirits as in these graves... but I know of a place we can get a handful of spirits, without any complications."

Callous looked at Johnny curiously. "Where?"

"Well, it doesn't exactly have a name..." Johnny said, as he looked

at Callous. "...but it's where I died."

"I see," Callous said. "Well, go right ahead and take us there."

"Right, just give me a moment..." Johnny said, as he took hold of Callous' shoulder. "Chaos Control!" he called, just as both of them vanished.

Once they reappeared, they found themselves in front of an entrance to a canyon, not too far from a pond. "...hm. Brings back memories..." Johnny hummed.

"So Johnny, what exactly did happen anyway?" Callous asked.

"Remember how I said that my last girlfriend tried electrocuting me to death?" Johnny said, as he pointed towards a spot not too far from the pond. "That happened right over there. After she croaked, a turtle called Desperado stopped me from killing King, and got me through the heart with his shell. Then, Wiper finished me off." After saying that, he chuckled. "It's kind of bizarre, to remember just how I died..."

"So you think we can absorb their souls, is that it?" Callous guessed.

"From what I got, Reeds didn't bother with getting any of the bodies back from here, me being an exception." Johnny said. "Even if their bodies have corroded into nothing, their spirits should linger around here." Then, he walked towards the pond. "I hope you won't mind me claiming Bliss' and Desperado's souls, as punishment for tying to kill me."

"I don't mind," Callous chuckled. "In fact, I'm curious about meeting them before we take them."

"Sounds like a plan..." Johnny chuckled, as he stopped walking, looking directly down at the ground. "...this is where that turtle got me..." he muttered, before placing his hands on the ground, Corruption covering them swiftly. "Now, time to say hi, Desperado!"

Callous watched as Johnny yanked away, and something indefinitely came out of the ground; say, a large turtle.

At first Desperado's spirit was confused. "Wah? Huh?"but he quickly recovered from it, and setting his sights on Johnny, the turtle gave the lion an intense, deadly glare."Johnny!"

"Hey, Desperado!" Johnny said, as he patted Desperado on his back. "Long time, no see! How are you? Or better yet, how's Hell? I haven't been there in a while!" he laughed, before looking to Callous. "Callous, I'd like you to meet Desperado. Desperado, Callous."

Desperado stared blankly at Callous as she gave a little wave and a cheeky grin. Something about that gal was off; WAY off. "So, is she Bliss's replacement or something?" the turtle asked, folding his arms.

"Now, now, that's a harsh way of putting it," chastised Callous teasingly. The way Callous replied somehow made Desperado shudder, and yet he was clueless as to why.

"Replacement?" Johnny said, before scoffing. "Give it a rest, already. It's been fifteen years; I'm sure Bliss must have gotten over that by now..." Then, he glanced at Desperado with an evil look. "...you know, aside from the fact that she died in vain, trying to stop me."

"Why don't you give it a rest, Johnny?" Desperado retorted, even if that crack irritated the heck out of him. "Just because you cheated death, doesn't mean you'll be able to do it again. The others'll put you back where you belong."

"Another dreamer," Callous muttered, rolling her eyes.

"What, are you talking about King and his troupe?" Johnny said, before laughing. "It's just amazing that even after all these years, you don't know what I'm capable of. You see, once Callous is done with dealing with a certain pest, I'm going after them... and I'm going to need your help for that."

"My help?" Desperado shook his head. "You have a dry sense of humor Johnny. I'd never help you."

"Not willingly anyway," Callous added, which made Desperado's eyes widen.

"...what's that supposed to mean?" Desperado asked suspiciously.

"Say, remember when I got you right through the gut?" Johnny said with a chuckle. "Man, the look on King's face was priceless... where was it again?" At that point, Johnny raised one of his arms, grinning evily. "Oh, I remember! It was right here!" Then, he suddenly shot his arm right at Desperado's gut, the exact same place he had punched a hole through the turtle all those years ago, only this time, his hand was fully covered in Corruption.

Desperado choked in the pain he felt; the unreal pain. It was much worse than when he died. "What...what is this?" he uttered, as Johnny slowly drained him away.

Callous smirked, enjoying the sight of his suffering.

"This?" Johnny chuckled. "Consider it payback, for gutting me with that piece of your shattered shell. From now on, your strength belongs to me!" As he spoke, he broke into full-on laughter. "And don't worry! I'll make sure to let Bliss, Sprinter and all the others keep ya company!"

Desperado shut his eyes, bracing for what would come as he started fading away through Johnny's arm. "...even then...you'll run out of luck..." he uttered. "...count on it!" Then he was finally gone, and completely absorbed by Johnny.

"Well, now that was over with," Callous said nonchalantly. "Who's next?"

"Next would be Bliss." Johnny replied, as he walked to a spot further from the pond. "Right here..." Nodding, he placed his hands on the ground, channeling Corruption into it.

Soon, when Johnny backed a bit away, a specter appeared before the two, this showing a female sheep; Bliss. Blinking, she looked around her with a confused look. "...uh... this feels, like, weird..."

"So you're Bliss, huh?" Callous looked her up and down, and

chuckled. "She looks pretty plain to me."

"Remember, I only got with her because her wool worked as a lightning rod; good for keeping King useless." Johnny said.

Hearing those voices got Bliss to look at both Johnny and Callous, though her attention was mostly directed at Johnny. "...you!" she yelled, as she stomped towards the lion. "Like, you bastard! Two-timing sneak! I should, like, punch you in the face for being such an-"

"Yeah, that's not gonna work." Johnny said, as he held up his arm, stopping Bliss. "As you can clearly see, you're nothing but a ghost... and I'm alive. Commendable strategy, but the delivery was nothing to write home about."

"And all the more reason to move on," added Callous, who was amused with Bliss's reaction to meeting them. "I'm Callous, by the way."

"...Callous?" Bliss uttered, as she gave the ewe quite the glare. "So, like, what guy are you gonna use her for in order to, like, kill him better?" she said, as she glared at Johnny.

"Using her? Me?" Johnny said, before chuckling. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Like, a broken heart, and lots of electricity!" Bliss snapped, as she looked away from Johnny with a huff.

"He has no need to try and con me," Callous replied. "I'm helping him out on my own free will. We're working together, you see? All we're doing is getting rid of everyone who will get in our way, and run home free." Then she gave Johnny quite the smirk. "Besides, he uses me in other ways, so to speak."

"Got that right." Johnny said with a smirk of his own, as he approached Bliss. "Speaking of, I think I have one last use for you, Bliss."

"Well, you can, like, forget it!" Bliss said, as she looked back at Johnny. "We were through, like, the moment you tried killing my

friends! I got nothing else to-" At that point, Johnny slammed his hand into Bliss' body, Corruption flowing from it. "...agh..."

"You're gonna help me get stronger." Johnny said with a grin.

Callous watched with a devious grin while Johnny started absorbing Bliss.

Coughing in pain, Bliss tried getting out of Johnny's grip, but to no avail. "...y-you..."

"So, how does it feel?" Johnny said with a wicked smile. "I hope it feels a lot worse than when you were fried to death."

"...like... you bastard..." Bliss managed to utter, before she closed her eyes. "...you won't win..." After that, Bliss was gone, absorbed into Johnny.

Callous chuckled. "I'm not surprised you didn't stick with her. She's a joke."

"Like I said, I only stuck with her because her wool was the perfect way to counter King." Johnny said, as he glanced at Callous. "'sides, she rarely put out, so even if I wasn't going to kill her, once King would've been dead, I'd have dropped her on the spot."

"So, who else?" Callous asked again.

"Well, there's a lot to pick from..." Johnny hummed, as he counted on his fingers. "But from what I heard, the places where they died are all spread out. For instance, Bloom and Gloom, along with... five others, I think... they all got slaughtered by Sage on a cliff. And I think Ripper killed a few guys in a cave somewhere..."

"Bloom and Gloom?" Callous rubbed her chin in amusement. "I always wondered where those two came from...anyhow, let's check them out."

"Alright, just give me a sec..." Johnny nodded, as he walked towards Callous. "Chaos Control!" Just like that, both of them warped away.

Soon enough, the two reappeared on a cliff, with the grass on the

cliff having a slight red taint to it. "...hm. One would've thought that it'd have been washed away by this time..." Johnny muttered.

"I didn't think Sage would be that violent," Callous chuckled. "So, mind if I take these ones this time?"

"Sure, go right ahead." Johnny said, as he closed his eyes, while Corruption seeped from underneath his feet, encompassing the cliff. "Let's see..." Soon, five spirits emerged from a cliff, namely a rat, a beaver, a panther, a koala and a cheetah.

"Well hello there," Callous said, chuckling. "Wow, we have an audience this time."

"What're you talkin' about, lady?" the rat asked.

The cheetah let out a whistle while he looked at Callous. "Man, this one's a looker!"

"You got that right..." the beaver nodded, just as he noticed Johnny standing there. "Wa- Johnny!" he said. "Wait, does that mean..."

Ignoring the beaver, Johnny looked at the rat. "Been a while, Mongrel. How did getting killed by Sage work out for ya?"

"...now that you mention it..." Shuddering, the beaver placed a hand against his neck. "She crushed me from the inside... that was horrifying!"

"Knocked me against another like rag dolls," the koala bear grumbled, rubbing his head.

"That's nothing! She ripped my limbs apart!" protested the cheetah.

"Say...where's Bloom and Gloom" The panther suddenly noticed, looking around.

"Oh, they're doing other business," Callous said.

The rat, Mongrel, gave Callous a shocked look. "Really?"

"Yeah, guess you could say that they got a second chance." Johnny

said with a shrug. "Earlier than me, to boot."

"...wait, hang on a second..." the beaver uttered, as he looked at Johnny with a baffled look. "You mean to tell me that you died?"

"What, didn't you guys get the memo?" Johnny said jokingly.

"But he was brought back to life," Callous said. "And now he roams among the land of the living, unlike you four."

"Not to mention he's got a smokin' hot chick with him!" Mongrel added. "Johnny, how the hell did you score a girl like-" he was cut off, the minute that Callous jabbed her hand into Mongrel's middle, and he felt pain. "Wha-what are y-you doing?"

"We need you," Callous chuckled, while she absorbed Mongrel. "We'll need all of you."

"Wait, what?" the beaver uttered, as he looked at Callous in shock, before looking at Johnny. "H-hey, she's your GF, right? Stop her!"

"No can do." Johnny shrugged. "Bliss and Desperado suffered the same fate as he did... and so will you."

"...n... no way! I'm outta here!" the beaver yelled, as he turned around. "Sorry, Mongrel! Guys, let's-" he began, when he felt that he couldn't move. "...eh?" Blinking, he looked down, only to see the Corruption Johnny had unleashed was keeping him and the others in place. "We're... stuck?"

"Alright, Callous, they're all yours." Johnny said, before grinning. "Dig in."

"Let's see if I can take the rest of them all at once," Callous chuckled. She opened her palm, and small streams of spiritual energy were pulled from the last four spirits, all of them collecting into her hand.

"...n-no..." groaned the cheetah, as he faded into nothingness.

"...how could you Johnny...?" uttered the koala bear, as he was gone too.

"...trying to make me feel sympathetic?" Johnny chuckled, as he looked at the beaver, who was the only one actively struggling to get away from Callous. "Not gonna work."

"...then how about this..." the beaver uttered, as he glared at Johnny. "...damn you to hell..." Then, he was absorbed by Callous.

Once the energy was gone and completely taken in by Callous, she took a deep breath and let out a long sigh of satisfaction. "That certainly feels good," she chuckled.

"It sure does." Johnny nodded, as he rubbed his chin. "...next, how about that cave? I'm sure we'll find someone there worth taking in."

"Possibly," Callous said. "Well, you know where it is. Go ahead and take us there."

"As you wish." Johnny nodded, just as the two vanished again.

Once they reappeared, they were in front of a cave, though a faint scent in the air lingered around them. "...blood." Johnny hummed. "I bet that Ripper went all out, here..."

"Hm, even after fifteen years it still smells like it," Callous said. Then she leaned against a wall of the cave that didn't have blood on it. "Well, since you only took two and I got five, it's only fair for you to take the ones here."

"Well, let's see who we get..." Johnny said, as he pressed his hands down on the ground, letting Corruption seep into the ground. Out from the ground, a female giraffe, a male elephant, and a male hyena emerged. Seeing the hyena, Johnny recoiled in disgust. "...you know, you can have him, Callous."

"What's the matter Johnny? You don't like ol' Prowler no more?" chuckled the hyena. Then he stopped short when he got a look at Callous.

"So your name is Prowler, huh?" Callous murmured. "I can only assume the name was given to you for a reason..."

"Yeah... Prowler has... issues." Johnny said, as he glanced at the

elephant and giraffe, both of them shuddering. "So, how did death work out for you guys?"

"Don't remind me of that, Johnny!" the elephant snapped, as he looked down at his stomach. "When I think of that little bug... that was a kid-sized monster! Isn't that right, Boss Prowler?"

Prowler shuddered like the other two.

After having observed Prowler, Callous chuckled. "Just what I thought...you have no backbone; you're spineless."

Prowler's eyes widened, and then grew sharp with rage. "Are you insulting me, woman?"

"Duh," Callous retorted apathetically.

"Yeah, I really don't see what you guys are complaining about." Johnny said with a shrug. "Death may sting, but it's really not that bad."

"Try saying that after having your gut split open, Johnny!" the elephant shouted, which made the lion glance at the two.

"...let's just get this over with." Johnny said, as he walked towards the elephant and giraffe. "The sooner we put Prowler out of our misery, the better."

"Wait a minute...does that mean that you died too, Johnny?" Prowler questioned in disbelief. "But you're alive! How did-" he was cut short as Callous grabbed his throat, and slammed the spirit against the wall, choking him.

Callous' face was but an inch away from his, and while simply looking at him, Prowler felt just as afraid as he was before Ripper tore him apart. "Because he had what it took to cheat death...while you on the other hand, you didn't." With Corruption coursing through to her hand, Prowler was sucked away through her arm to his shock.

"Boss Prowler!" the elephant yelled upon seeing this, but Johnny grabbing both him and the giraffe silenced them, as they were absorbed by the lion.

"You two are gonna thank me for this later on." Johnny said, as the two were absorbed into his body.

Once Prowler was completely absorbed, Callous looked at her hand. "Strange...it feels weird..." then she turned to Johnny. "Should I know what "issues" he had?"

"...he liked kids." Johnny said, before he shuddered. "Let's leave it at that."

Callous didn't quite catch his drift, but she shrugged. It was really none of her concern anyway. "So, is that it for around here, or are there still some that need to be taken?" she asked.

"There should be five more." Johnny said, as he rubbed his chin. "And I think I know where to find a few of them..." After saying that, he warped both of them out of the cave.

Once they reappeared, they found themselves in a forest, though the only thing that really stood out was a small crater in the ground. "Yep, someone definitely got killed here." Johnny noted.

"It seems to be a reoccurring theme here that someone got killed by someone else," Callous chuckled.

"Well, let's see who's here..." Johnny chuckled, as Corruption soon filled the area. After a short while, the spirits of a male shark, a female orangutang, a female lemur and a male bee appeared out of the ground.

"Whoa!" the shark was the first to react with his arms wailing about, like he lost balance. "Hey, I'm floating!" Then he saw Johnny, and a big grin appeared on his face. "Johnny! How's it going? It's been awhile!"

"Yeah, well, you know... being dead makes it hard to make housecalls." Johnny laughed.

"Wait, dead?" the orangutang uttered, as she looked at her arms. "...now that you say that... sheesh, King really did kill me back then, didn't he..."

"You think you had it bad?" the bee said, as he folded his arms. "I was torn to piecez by that Hunter!" After saying that, the bee looked around him. "...wait... zhis izn't where I waz killed!"

"Well, what can you do, Zipper." Johnny shrugged.

"So King and Hunter did the lot of you in, huh?" Callous chuckled. "Funny, I didn't think they'd have the galls to kill."

"Actually, Queen killed me," the shark threw in with a raised finger. "Slammed her fist through my face and into the ground."

"Well, that explains the crater," Callous murmured to herself, peering down at him.

"And who're you, anyway?" the lemur asked Callous.

"Callous," the ewe answered.

"Some name..." the orangutang mused.

"...wait..." Zipper uttered, as he tilted his head. "...how long haz it been zince we were killed?"

"Fifteen years, I'd say." Johnny replied.

"...zo why are you looking juzt like you did all thoze yearz ago, Johnny?" Zipper inquired, as he folded his arms. "That raizez zo many queztionz..."

"I'm sure it does." Johnny noted, before glancing at Callous. "So, which ones do you want?"

"I'll take the orangutang and the bee and you can have the other two," Callous said.

"Wait, what are you talking about?" The lemur asked, just as Callous grabbed Zipper and the orangutang instantly. As Corruption took their souls bit by bit, the lemur grew horrified. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, just a trick we learned about earlier." Johnny said, before he suddenly grabbed the shark and the lemur, beginning to suck their

souls into him as well. "Feels painful, doesn't it?"

"Agh... how are you..." the orangutang managed to utter, before she was fully absorbed by Callous.

"W-wait!" Zipper pleaded desperately. "We could ztrike up a deal! There'z no need to go to zuch extremez..." However, his pleads fell on deaf ears, as he was absorbed by Callous.

The shark was so shocked that he didn't even bother fighting it, and he was absorbed by Johnny while the lemur watched helplessly. "How...could you do this...to us?" she uttered, just as she was absorbed too.

"That takes care of that," Callous said, dusting off her hands together.

"There's just one more to go." Johnny said, as he smirked. "And it's gonna be a pleasure to..." Before he could finish his sentence, he looked around him, as he had sensed something. "...someone's watching us... and I think I know who it is."

"...who?" Callous asked.

"...the last one." Johnny said, as he frowned. "Come on out, where I can see ya, Sprinter!"

In that instant, however, what appeared to be a sphere shot out from one part of the woods, blasting Johnny straight in the back. "...I've seen what you've been up to..."

"Is that so?" Callous remarked, though she was a bit surprised seeing Johnny sneaked up on like that.

"...tsch... grew a backbone in death, didn't you, Sprinter?" Johnny coughed, as he got back on his feet, glaring at the woods.

"You know, it's funny..." the voice uttered, though where he was hiding, none of them could see yet. "All those years ago, I was desperate to get away from you; to get out of this deathtrap... but in death, I grew a lot stronger. And I have you to thank for that, Johnny."

Growling, Johnny clenched his hands into fists. "Tsch... I never thought that I'd be fighting a ghost, of all things..."

"Pretty gusty of you to be hiding out like that," Callous said sarcastically, looking around to see if she could sense where Sprinter was.

"I already told you, I've seen what you've been doing." Sprinter called. "Bliss, Desperado, all the others... some of them may have deserved what you did... but I'm not going to attack you head-on; not when I can take you out from a distance."

"...you're still a fool." Johnny said, as he allowed a sphere of darkness to form in his hand. "I'm going to enjoy taking your soul for myself!" Then, he hurled the sphere directly into the woods, creating a small explosion of darkness.

"Missed me." Sprinter's voice called, just as more spheres were shot at both Johnny and Callous, coming from all around them.

Callous did a flip to evade the spheres, but she was patiently trying to pick up where Sprinter was.

Gritting his teeth, Johnny began hurling more spheres of darkness out into the woods, taking out more of the ghostly spheres that were thrown at him and Callous. "Show yourself!"

"I don't think so, Johnny." Sprinter called, as more spheres were hurled at the two.

Callous glanced in one direction, the direction she thought that she sensed Sprinter, and she summoned up her whip, hurling it in that direction.

However, even when the whip vanished into the woods, no indication was given as to whether or not that Sprinter had been hit; however, the spheres stopped firing at the two.

Glaring at where Callous threw the whip, Johnny cracked his neck. "Did that do it?"

"Not by a long shot." In that instant, a ghostly arm shot right through

Johnny, tearing a sizeable hole in his body, as they could see a ghostly, male rabbit behind Johnny. "This, however, should."

"Ah, there you are," Callous said. Then she reached over and tried to grab the rabbit.

However, the ghost was quicker, pulling his arm out of Johnny, and leaping away from Callous. "I have no quarrel with you..." Sprinter said, as he watched Johnny collapse to his knees, before looking back at Callous. "...but if you don't take him and leave, I'll have to get violent."

"...kkh..." Johnny coughed, as he watched blood leak out from the hole in his gut. "...heh... so, you think we're... even now, Sprinter...?"

Callous simply came over and helped Johnny to his feat. "Well, it's your call Johnny." Somehow, Callous wasn't all that worried over Johnny, but whether or not she knew it wasn't anything to worry about, or whether she just didn't care, was unknown.

"...I'm not leaving..." Johnny coughed, as he glared at Sprinter, who was still looking at the two of them. "...until that son of a bitch is fueling my strength..."

"...alright, then..." Sprinter sighed, before getting in a fighting stance. "But here's a fair warning; I've been practicing what I can do as a ghost for the past fifteen years. No matter how many spirits you have within you, you're not getting away unscathed."

Callous looked back and forth between the two. "So, you want to face him alone, or should I take him?"

"...you go get him." Johnny said, as he held his hand over the hole Sprinter had created, while smirking at her. "I'll back you up if you need it, though I doubt that you'll need any help."

"Right," Callous abandoned Johnny for the time being and approached Sprinter. "Alright, let's see what you can do."

Nodding, Sprinter suddenly vanished from sight, before reappearing behind Callous. "Boo." Then, he threw a ghostly sphere at Callous from behind, before quickly returning to where he stood before, as if

he hadn't moved at all.

Callous batted away the ghostly sphere with her hand, and turned to Sprinter, chuckling. "Good thing I can just hijack some of the training Jill's done."

"I don't know this Jill..." Sprinter said, as he motioned for Callous to come at him. "...but if you resort to copying her, she must be a lot stronger than you."

"Stronger? Pffft, I'm just lazy, and figure I don't need much to beat you," Callous said. As Corruption came off her hand, she lurched forward and tried to punch Sprinter in the face.

However, as the punch seemed to connect, it only phased through Sprinter's head, as if she had punched at thin air. "You're going to have to try harder than that." Sprinter said, as he suddenly aimed a kick at Callous, with an extraordinary force behind the kick.

It definitely pushed her back a little ways, but she remained on her feet. "Not bad," she said. Collecting some Corruption in her hands, she hurled globs of darkness at Sprinter.

Sprinter was quick to outrun the incoming globs of darkness, keeping his eyes on Callous. Without a word, he began hurling ghostly spheres at Callous, without stopping.

"...so that's why we kept missing..." Johnny mused, as he kept his eyes on Sprinter. "Bastard... still living up to your name, even in death..."

"You know, it's funny," Callous was pretty quick herself as she maneuvered around them, but it eventually got to a point where she had to bring out her scythe and whack them away. "I wonder why Desperado and Bliss didn't bother fighting back like you did. Do you think it was because they were weak?"

"They died, believing Johnny had died along with them." Sprinter said, as he kept hurling spheres at Callous. "However, I felt guilty about not letting King and the others know about Johnny before I passed away, so I've been training to be able to rectify that mistake."

"Hmph... still as naïve as before." Johnny scoffed.

"Inspiring," Callous remarked sarcastically, as she continued to deflect the spheres with her scythe. "You're not the only spirit who's done this, you know..." Then she began to charge in the middle of it. "But all the same, I'll reap your soul too!" And she attempted a slice at the rabbit.

Sprinter, however, managed to duck under the slice, eyes locked on Callous. "By all means, try." In that instant, he suddenly vanished.

"Tsch..." Growling, Johnny looked around him. "Be on your guard, Callous! If I know him, he's planning a sneak attack!"

Callous frowned on that, but instead of quickly looking around, she stood there and closed her eyes. She fell into a deep concentration, heightening her senses so she could counter attack if the time came.

As she did that, Johnny just so happened to notice something behind her; namely, what appeared to be a blanket of fog gathering in one area. "...the hell...?" In that instant, however, he felt something powerful from the fog. "...shit! Callous, watch out for that fog!"

Just as he said that, the fog shot right from where it was located, aiming to envelope her within it.

Callous' eyes popped open and she jumped away from it. "Whoa!"

As she leapt away from it, the fog stopped in its tracks, floating ominously where Callous had once stood. This sight, however, baffled Johnny. "...since when the hell could you turn into fog, Sprinter?" he uttered.

"This is the pinnacle of my training." Sprinter's voice called, seemingly from within the fog, which was advancing towards Callous again.

Callous was getting irritated with this. She conjured up Corruption in her hands and tried to throw it at the fog.

However, while the Corruption hit the fog dead-on, it passed right through it, with absolutely nothing indicating that it had been damaged by that attack.

"The hell is up with that fog...?" Johnny uttered, as he got up on his feet. *...damn rabbit's gone and made me curious, now.* he thought.

"Now, it's time to finish this." In that instant, the fog shot right at Callous; however, before she could dodge, Johnny quickly ran up to her and pushed her out of the way, before the fog engulfed him instead of Callous.

"Wha?" Callous did not expect that at all, and she sat there a moment while staring at the fog, stupefied.

"...why would you do that, Johnny?" Sprinter's voice uttered. "She could have leapt away from that on her own..."

"Hey, I wanted to see what the big deal with this fog-thing was." Johnny said. "From the looks of it, it's not that impressive... so, how do I get-"

In that instant, the sound of someone being impaled, along with a sudden splash of blood coming out from within the fog, cut off Johnny's speech, replaced by a pained grunt.

Callous' eyes widened. "Johnny?"

"...kkh... the hell-" Before long, blood began shooting out from the fog in numerous locations, each time accompanied by the sickening sound of flesh being torn apart.

"Within the fog... nothing can escape." Sprinter's voice uttered ominously.

Callous grit her teeth. This spirit was really starting to make her mad, and with what it was doing to Johnny, it was only serving to increase her rage. It was her turn to be ominous, as she got to her feet. The atmosphere slowly darkened, and the shadows started to stir, while a dark aura appeared around her.

"Let him go," she said darkly.

"...he has sins to pay for." Sprinter uttered, though with the darkened atmosphere, the streams of blood stopped, though one could see a pool of blood accumulating underneath the fog. "Do you intend to risk your own life, to save his wretched life?"

At that point, though, they could hear Johnny laugh; a dull and pained laughter, but a laughter, nonetheless. "Shows what you know, Sprinter..." he coughed. "She... can't die."

" *If you don't release him, I'll make you..."* Callous' voice had changed to a more demonic tone, and while looking up at the fog, her eyes turned red.

"...how will you do that?" Sprinter uttered. "I am fog. You cannot touch me."

"Hey... Callous..." Johnny chuckled from within the fog. "I liked this guy better... when he was a scaredy-cat... so make him scream."

The aura around Callous grew bigger and darker, and she started to growl lowly. Then she knelt down, and something scary started happening. Something was trying to push itself out of her pack, and judging from a growing scream, it was painful. Shredding through her clothes, a pair of demonic wings grew out, covered and dripping with black goo. Opening her mouth, Callous' canine teeth started to grow longer and sharper, turning into some form of vampire teeth, and her nails even grew sharper too. Then the aura around her grew so dark that it consumed Callous...

...in a cocoon of darkness.

"...what...?" Sprinter uttered, having no idea of what Callous was doing.

Soon the cocoon disbanded, but it left a black figure standing there. *"I'll give you one more chance to let him go,"* she snarled. Her voice was like the combination of hers with a demon's growl. *"If you don't, I'll send you through something worse than Hell itself."*

"...what did you-"

"Callous... he's not gonna let me go." Johnny said, cutting off Sprinter. "I can't move in this fog... and I guess he's dying to kill me... so go on; make him scream."

"So be it." By then Sprinter could see her eyes, which could scare the living daylights out of anyone and she started to approach the fog.

"...heh... this is gonna be fun." Johnny chuckled.

"...how will you harm me? You cannot even touch me." In that instant, what appeared to be an arm made from mist shot out from the fog, grabbing hold of Callous. "That, however, does not work the other way around."

"You don't even know who created me," Callous said, taking the arm with a hand. Then she dug her sharp nails into it, while Corruption seeped through; and unlike her usual dark purple Corruption, it was an ominous dark red. Also, unlike her other attempts at damaging the spirit, this would actually do it. *"And the one who created me can make even the dead cringe in their graves."*

What rang through the air just then was a ghastly shriek, as the fog around Callous quickly faded away. "...how... how did you do that?"

"Sounds like something hurt you out there, Sprinter..." Johnny chuckled. "I'd like to see that again... if this fog wasn't here..."

"...I have no idea how you managed to wound me... but I won't let you do it again!" In that instant, the fog shot right at Callous, fully encompassing her; however, while there didn't seem to be anything that was restraining her, she couldn't move.

Callous didn't fret. She simply surrounded her own body with the dark red Corruption. *"You're not worth my time,"* she growled. After the Corruption around her pulsed, it grew to a point where it imploded around her, aimed at the fog around her.

The implosion somehow managed to disperse the fog around her, as something materialized up in the sky; namely, Sprinter, who looked like he had been mauled by a pack of rabid dogs. "...kkh..."

While he appeared injured, he still looked down at Callous with a determined look. "...I may not survive this battle... but I'll make sure that at least one of you do not live to see the day!"

At that point, Callous would notice that in spite of the fog having attacked her, a small blanket of it was still surrounding Johnny; just in time for more streams of blood to shoot out from it.

Callous jumped up and grabbed Sprinter by the throat. *"Unlike my pathetic twin, I'm not intimidated by that kind of trick."* She dug her nails into his throat, and concentrated on absorbing the rabbit.

"Kkh..." Gritting his teeth, Sprinter tried as hard as he could to resist being absorbed. "...what good is this going to accomplish?" he uttered, glaring at Callous. "Even if you absorb me... he's not going to survive, with the severity of his wounds."

Callous' grip tightened. *"I happen to know a thing or two about how to bring the dead back to life."* In order to reduce his will of resistance, she dug Corruption into him to weaken him.

"...why even bother?" Sprinter uttered, as he was slowly fading. "What does Johnny mean to you...?"

"...it's not your place to question that," Callous answered.

"...still... you must feel something for him..." Sprinter coughed. "...if you went to this extent... to save him from me..."

Callous tightened her grip even more around Sprinter's neck. *"The only thing I value is freedom, and he's going to help me get that."*

"...something tells me that you're not honest with me..." Sprinter uttered, as his eyes closed, before Callous fully absorbed him.

Once he was gone, Callous slowly sank down to the ground onto her feet. Words like that shouldn't affect her, and yet they did somehow. Why was that? For all she knew it was a last minute desperate attempt to mess with her mind, but if it was working, something was wrong.

"Ugh..." In that instant, the fog surrounding Johnny faded away, as

he stumbled forward. Needless to say, he was a bloody mess; apart from the hole Sprinter had formed in his gut earlier, his entire body was riddled with sizeable holes and cuts, blood leaking out of him everywhere. "...that... really... stung." he managed to utter, before collapsing to his knees.

Callous turned and walked to him silently.

Johnny was breathing heavily, holding onto the steel container on his chest, the light on it blinking fairly slowly. "Tsch... I've never lost so much blood before..." he muttered.

Callous put a hand on Johnny's shoulder. *"...do you think you're going to be alright?"* she asked; a dumb question, but somehow it escaped her lips before she could stop.

"...dunno." Johnny uttered. "It's not like it hurts... but I'm gonna need a lot of bandages... and a few hundred packs of blood..."

"...c'mon," she said, pulling Johnny to his feet.

"Tsch... thanks..." Johnny coughed, as he winced. "...well... you got that bastard, at least..." he muttered, before chuckling. "Guess this... wasn't a complete bust, huh...?"

"...I guess not," Callous replied. " *That was all of them, right?"*

"Yep..." Johnny nodded. "There's only ten left... and all of them are still alive..." Then, he winced again. "Well, I'm on the fence, regarding the first one..."

"Then let's get out of here," Callous said. She flapped her wings, taking her and Johnny into the air and flying away. To be honest, she was amazed she transformed into something like this, and it would be a plus to use it against Jill.

Yet, while that came to mind, she wasn't as enthusiastic about it as she thought she would be.

"...hey." Johnny coughed, as he looked at Callous. "...thanks... for getting me outta that fog..."

Callous glanced at him, and then turned her eyes to the sky. *"...you're welcome."*

"...heh." Johnny chuckled, as he looked up at the sky as well. "...so... where to now?"

"We're going to fix you up," Callous said. *"You can't really do anything in your condition."*

"...yeah... guess not..." Johnny uttered, as he closed his eyes. "...kinda puts a damper on us collecting souls, though..."

"It won't take long...after you're taken care of, we can go back to that," Callous promised.

"...yeah, we can do that." Johnny nodded, as he glanced at Callous.

Callous had never encountered a situation like what just happened, and she didn't know what to think of it. All she could do was fly on in denial.

Chapter 67

CHAPTER – SIXTY-SEVEN

In the cave, everyone within it was asleep, dreaming the night away... but there was one who was awake, standing alone by the spring further away.

Metal Sonic.

...if I'm going to use Unity properly... the Metallix thought, as he looked at his arms. *...I should get some practice in.* With that, he closed his eyes, as he allowed a sense of tranquility fall over him.

Chaos couldn't help but be curious about what Metal was up to this time, so he came to check on him.

Keeping his eyes closed, Metal recalled just how tranquil he had been, when Jill had played her harp and sung that song. *...she really is something...* he thought, just as a familiar, dark-green energy enveloped his arms.

This strange dark green energy was really strange to Chaos. He wondered if he should be alarmed since he could sense the Chaos Energy in it, but it didn't seem to trigger any negative vibes in the creature; and that was something coming from the God of Destruction...

At that point, Metal's eyes opened, as he looked down at his arms. *"...alright. As long as I stay calm long enough for it to amass, it should stick until I dispel it."* he mused, as he threw a few punches into thin air. *"Pretty convenient, I must say."*

Chaos continued to watch Metal mingle with Unity quietly.

"...I wonder..." Metal hummed, as he closed his eyes again. Then, much quicker than before, his legs were coated with the dark-green energy as well. As he opened his eyes and saw that, Metal chuckled. *"So, if I have Unity active... I can summon it at will. So far,*

the only problem lies in activating it, by remaining calm..."

The water creature cocked his head curiously at what Metal was figuring out.

"Now, one more test, before I move on to actual combat..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes again. *If I focus it around me like an aura... I wonder if it will have any other effects?* he thought, as Unity began amassing around his entire body.

Chaos, somehow, grew steadily uneasy as the Unity built up. It was a strange energy...and it was also a seemingly powerful energy too. Also...the creature couldn't help but have a bad feeling about it. Sure, at first he didn't sense anything hazardous about it, but the more energy Metal was summoning, the more that he suddenly got that bad feeling.

Soon, Metal was fully covered in the dark-green energy, though it didn't seem to cause anything unnatural to him. *"...hm. Well, good to know that I can do this, at least."* he shrugged, as he looked at the spring. *"Now... how to properly use this ability..."*

Chaos stayed hidden to continue watching Metal.

"...let's see how much power a projectile holds." Metal hummed, as he opened his hand, letting a ball of Unity appear in it. Then, he hurled the ball towards the woods, though not towards where Chaos was hiding.

Trees were blown to mere splinters and a good crater was bored into the ground. Chaos was impressed.

Even Metal was impressed, as he looked at his arms. *"...hm. The force within this is certainly destructive..."* he noted, as he allowed yet another ball to appear in his hand. *"...but I wonder... can I change it as I see fit?"* After saying that, he began molding the ball of Unity into different shapes.

There was that bad feeling again. The longer Chaos looked at this, the more unsteady the beast became. He sensed what the Unity was doing, and wondered if Metal was aware of it or not. The Unity

was having an effect on him...an effect that was too subtle to tell right away, but with the Chaos Energy in the mixture, Chaos could sense it.

Soon, Metal had molded the ball into a lance-like object, which he was rotating in his hands. *"Heh... this is pretty handy."* After that, he looked back down at his arms again. *"...but that was just on its own... I wonder; would it work better in conjunction with my nanotechnology?"*

Curious again, Chaos waited for Metal to do it; even if he could still sense what the Unity was doing to him.

Nodding, Metal allowed several tendrils to protrude from his hands, Unity encompassing them as well. *"Interesting... it seems that the only thing I can't do is to turn into some Super-like form, like Jill can..."* he mused.

Chaos still felt like Unity was doing something to him, and while he still couldn't put his watery finger on it, he also grew less alarmed. It wasn't doing any harm, it seemed...but it was still unknown what it was. He stood there, trying to interpret what it was doing.

"...what else is Jill capable of with Purity, anyway?" Metal hummed, as he sat down, the tendrils retracting into his body. *"If I'm going to combat Deity with this force, I need to know Unity's full potential..."* Then, he closed his eyes. *...hm. Guess Callous is too busy to bother calling me, after my outburst. That's fine by me.* he thought.

Chaos finally decided to come out of hiding and approach Metal, against his better judgment.

"...hm?" Blinking, Metal glanced towards Chaos. *"Well, look who's up and running."* he said in a bemused tone. *"How are you doing?"*

All Chaos could offer was a shrug.

"Hm... I see." Metal nodded, before looking away from the water deity. *"I know that I've already thanked you for allowing me to experiment on a Chaos Emerald, but it bears repeating; this power is beyond anything I've ever seen. I bet even Eggman would eat his*

mustache, if he found out that I discovered such a force..."

If only Chaos could speak, so that he could comment on that, but the monster only remained silent.

"...only one day of training remains..." Metal muttered. *"And then... Jill's going to defeat Callous, and we'll move on to take down Deity..."* Saying that, he closed his eyes. *"...though, I still have to wonder why Goddess didn't just swallow her pride, and tell Jill more about all this..."* Then, he glanced at Chaos. *"I mean, I swallowed my own pride, to help Jill do this, did I not?"*

Chaos nodded in agreement.

"And I was supposed to be the one to kill her, and everything..." Sighing, Metal looked back at the spring. *"...if her arch-enemy goes to a greater extent to help her than her mother does... just what does that say about us?"*

Chaos honestly didn't know, so he shrugged again.

"...hmph. No offense, but talking to you about this doesn't get me anywhere, Chaos." Metal muttered, as he stood up. *"...morning won't come for some time... maybe I should try and find her, to get more answers?"*

Chaos, again, shrugged. He really wouldn't know the first place to look for Jill's mother, but if Metal wanted to look for her, he wouldn't stop him.

"...the question, however..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...is where to start looking... that woman could be just about everywhere..."*

Chaos looked up at the sky, and and questionably pointed to it. It could be faster if Metal were to fly through the air to search.

Looking up at where Chaos pointed, Metal rubbed his chin. *"...true..."* he hummed, as he closed his eyes. *...maybe I could also...* he thought, before he began flying up into the air. *"I'll go and search for her. It probably won't take too long."* he said, before flying away.

Chaos watched until Metal was gone to start for the caves. If Metal was gone, then someone had to watch over Silver and Jill to make sure nothing happened to them.

Flying through the sky, Metal's eyes carefully scanned the landscape below him, to properly seek out Goddess. *Since she's a spirit, and is proficient with Purity...* he thought. *...then if I pick up any signals from Purity energy, I'll definitely find her.* Metal started to head towards a collection of clouds in the sky. Like he expected, he did pick up a reading of Purity, but it was very faint. Also, it didn't come from the ground. It was coming from the skies ahead. *...is she in there?* Metal thought, as he looked at the skies ahead of him. *...that makes things a lot easier.* With that in mind, he flew towards the clouds. The reading became slightly stronger, and as Metal plunged through the clouds.

While in its mists, a strange feeling would come over Metal. Everything looked completely ordinary, yet Metal felt like he was passing through unknown territory. *...what is this feeling?* he thought, as he kept focusing on going ahead. *No matter... Goddess should be just up ahead.*

Metal found himself emerging from the sea of clouds he was traversing, and beheld an amazing sight. It looked like a large, silver castle sitting on the sea of clouds, and the moon's reflection was making it shine in the night. Not only that, but the reading seemed to be coming from there. *...hm. She certainly knows where to stay...* Metal thought, as he flew towards the castle. *But... why would a spirit require a castle like this...?* Metal landed in the courtyard, and the reading pointed him toward the front steps that would lead him inside.

"Alright, time to see how her living quarters are." Metal hummed to himself, as he walked towards the steps, heading into the castle.

While the outside of the castle was glorious, the inside was pretty much in ruins. Some pillars were crumbled and collapsed, and the foyer chamber was dusty everywhere. There were also some scratches across the walls, and even splattered dried stains of blood. Beside how the place looked, it was very quiet. The readings came from a pair of double doors at the side, with stained glass

windows on it. One of them had been bashed in.

...not exactly what I had imagined. Metal thought, as he approached the double doors, slowly opening them, to see who was behind it.

Behind the double doors was a chapel. Most of the pews were knocked down, broken, or pushed out of the way. There were stained glass windows above, but they were completely broken out and the moonlight dropped down from them.

Underneath the moon's light, Goddess's transparent figure sat; her back to Metal, so she didn't see him come in.

...there must have been some form of battle within this place. the Metallix thought, as he approached Goddess cautiously.

"I'm surprised you found this place Metal Sonic," Goddess suddenly spoke without moving at all. "I thought my daughter was the only one who could gain access to this place."

"...well, locating you wasn't all that difficult." Metal said with a mild shrug, as he continued to approach Goddess. *"Apart from you, me and Jill, how many others in this world has some manner of control over Purity? All I did was to scan for signs of Purity, and... well, here I am."*

Goddess rose to her feet but still didn't turn to him. "What do you want?"

"Answers, for the most part." Metal said, as he stopped walking, before folding his arms. *"...Ray told us everything, but I'm not satisfied just yet. Tell me why you couldn't just help Jill out."*

"...because Deity Novagod cursed me." Goddess turned around, and showed Metal that the same strange markings that were on his hands, were all across her face.

"...what happened to you?" Metal uttered, as he took a few steps closer to Goddess. *"...don't tell me... you tried fighting him on your own?"*

"...countless times," Goddess answered. "I already had these scars.

The reason you could not see them before was because I was using Purity to hide them. This place, however...it has the tendency to reveal the hidden."

"...hm." Metal hummed, as he folded his arms. *"...this curse you speak of... what does it entail?"*

"...when I was the most vulnerable, and least expecting it, he attacked me," Goddess said. "He placed a curse on me, on my soul. If I do not give him my soul, then the curse will take another's soul..."

Metal's eyes widened; he had a faint feeling about who's soul Goddess was talking about. *"...don't tell me... Jill?"* he uttered.

Goddess turned away shamefully.

"...damn..." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...I have another question."* he said, before opening his eyes, looking sternly at Goddess. *"...why didn't you tell me about Knuckles, when I placed Deity's prison on Angel Island?"*

"Because Sonic and his friends needed to keep his body there," Goddess said. "They have a plan."

"...well, it seems to have backfired considerably, now." Metal said . *"Especially since Deity consumed his soul."*

Goddess jolted, and shot back Metal a shocked look. "What?"

"Jill told me that Light Gaia came to her in a dream, and told her the bad news." Metal said, as he folded his arms. *"So, if you get the chance to speak with Sonic, I'd like you to say something to him for me; unless we can get Chaos up to Angel Island, the plan's a bust."*

Goddess turned away again.

"...also, I think you should probably hear this, seeing as you are Jill's mother." Metal said, before closing his eyes. *"Deity... came to me in a dream... and said that..."* He stopped, unwilling to finish that sentence; however, he had to do it. *"...Jill's death is close."*

That was a pretty hard blow on her, and Goddess faced Metal again

in horror. "No..." She knelt down with her head hung low. "If Deity were to take her soul..." she managed to look up at Metal. "...the curse specified that I had until her death to decide whether I wanted to give up my soul to him. If she dies before I decide, then the curse grants her soul in his grasp...and when that happens, there's nothing I can do about it."

"...you mean to tell me that if she dies, he can claim her soul instantly?" Metal uttered, stepping away from Goddess. " *Even when he's trapped on Angel Island?"*

Goddess nodded, looking to the ground.

"...you can't be serious..." Metal uttered, as he held a hand to his head; the realization that if he were to kill Jill, Deity claiming her soul would be his fault. *"...there must be some way to prevent it!"* he suddenly said, looking desperately at Goddess. *"Apart from sacrificing your soul... there has to be a way to stop him from doing that!"*

"...there isn't any other way," Goddess said finally. Standing up, she looked at Metal solemnly. "...I'll do it."

"...you're serious?" Metal uttered. *"...if you are... then you have to teach me something..."* Then, he sighed. *"...how to break through the Master Emerald's power."* Saying that, he clenched his hands into fists. *"Because if Jill dies, and your soul is claimed by Deity... I'm the only one who can stop him."*

Underneath her cloak, a flash of light went underway. At first, Metal couldn't see Goddess's face, but something pushed itself out of her back, which forced off her cloak. It was a Holy Form, very much like Jill's where Goddess was a completely white being. The difference was that she had real, white feathered wings out of her back, however these wings were still in the poor condition that Deity made them to be; ruffled, scarce feathers and dried with blood.

More of the strange markings covered her entire body.

"...like your experiment with Unity, as you call it," Goddess said. *"You attain a state of inner peace, and then you concentrate on*

breaching through with a simple blast of Purity energy."

"...so you already know about Unity, then." Metal noted, as he held his arm up, as dark-green energy coated it. *"But if you do, I have to ask... does Deity know of it?"*

"He may have caught wind of it," Goddess answered. *"But he doesn't comprehend just what it can do."*

"...I'm going to go out on a limb, and guess that you don't, either." Metal presumed.

Goddess nodded. *"I thought it would be impossible to combine the two, but you have proven what I thought wrong..."*

"...but..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...I'm still unsure on whether or not Deity managed to overpower Sonic, Knuckles and Fang, or if he simply managed to take them by surprise..."* Then, he looked at Goddess. *"Just... how strong is Deity, anyway?"*

Goddess turned away from Metal again to consider her words. *"...Jillian defeated you when you had the power of all seven Chaos Emeralds,"* she said. *"But she wasn't able to defeat Deity Novagod. The most she could do was seal him away temporarily. He has had over 50 years of experience with Corruption, which makes him a very dangerous foe."*

"...so it's going to take everything I have to take him down, huh..." Metal said, before rubbing his temples. *"I swear, if I were organic, I'd probably get an aneurysm by just trying to make sense of all this..."*

Goddess was silent for a moment, and then, *"...the sooner I have it done, the less amount of worry there is. If she asks of me..."* she took a deep breath. *"...do not tell her about this."*

"...I won't." Metal uttered, as he looked at Goddess. *"...but... as long as Deity is vanquished... you can be freed, right?"*

"...yes." Goddess turned back to him and opened her arms out, as a ball of light appeared over her palms, and it began to enlarge. *"Now go."* The light overtook the entire chapel in a blinding flash...

...and Metal suddenly found himself flying through the clouds again, only now he came out of the clouds and stopped in the middle of the night sky. No castle was anywhere in sight.

"...the hell?" Metal uttered, as he looked around himself in bewilderment. *"...she must have gone to Deity..."* Sighing, Metal folded his arms. *"Well... the only thing I can do, is to make sure that Jill does not die. Not by my hand, not by Callous' hand... she's not going to die."* With this in mind, he flew back towards the training area.

"So, any ideas on the next graveyard we raid?" Callous asked Johnny. After a little Corruption touch, Johnny was back in shape and the two of them had stopped in the middle of a forest. Callous had reverted back to her normal self long ago.

"Well, we've gone over Angel Island (as best we could), Future City, Westopolis, the place I died..." Johnny hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...well, you did suggest Station Square..."

"Let's hit that then," Callous said. "Dawn is going to be fairly soon, so we should hurry. You in any condition to use Chaos Control?"

"Yeah..." Johnny nodded, as he winced. "...but if we take every soul individually, it'll take us the rest of the night to collect 'em in Station Square. Got any ideas on how to speed the process up?"

"Not too long ago, I managed to take 4 souls at once, and that was because I concentrated on channeling their energy together," Callous said. "We could create some field of Corruption that could pull the spirits into it, trapping them and once we have all of them, we can just take it from there..."

"...well, let's try that, and see what we can do." Johnny nodded, as he closed his eyes. Then, both of them vanished.

Once they reappeared, they found themselves on the outskirts on Station Square, in a pretty large graveyard. "...alright, let's do this." Johnny said.

Callous opened her hand and an orb of darkness appeared, which she let go into the air. The ball began to grow and swirl almost as if it was a black hole, and without any warning, the first spirit was yanked out of their grave with a glow, and with a shriek, was absorbed into the orb of darkness above. Then another one was pulled out, and sucked in. Then another, and another, and soon it started to pull them out in numbers.

"...woah." Johnny uttered, as he looked up at the orb. "...should I try that, too, or do you have this under control?"

"Hm...I think I got it here," Callous said, observing all the souls that were being collected. "If we overdo it we might attract attention like before."

"True..." Johnny nodded, as he looked around. "...but at least there aren't any Locks or Sprinters around to put a stop to our hunt, huh?"

"Let's hope not," Callous remarked in a grumble. Then she noticed that the number of spirits diminished and suddenly there were none. "Hm?" Looking at the orb, it had grown massively in size and she could sense all that spiritual energy packed in there. "Well, it must have worked better than I thought," she said, smirking.

"Not too shabby, I must say..." Johnny noted, as he chuckled. "So, how do we split this one between us?"

"I guess we just absorb it simultaneously and trust that it will be divided evenly between us," Callous said, putting a hand on the surface of the orb.

"Well, that does make sense." Johnny nodded, as he placed a hand on the orb as well. "Ready when you are!"

Digging her fingers into the orb, it opened up streams of spiritual energy that swarmed around Callous' arm as she began to take it in. With it being many spirits at once, the rush was even greater than before which nearly took her breathe away. As he dug his fingers into the orb as well, taking in the spirits that Callous didn't get, Johnny was nearly blown away by the adrenaline rush as well. The orb quickly deflated like a balloon losing its air with their efforts, and

soon there was nothing left as the orb itself withered away between their finger tips.

Callous clenched her hand as he took a deep, satisfied sigh. "That...felt incredible," she uttered.

"...yeah..." Johnny nodded, as he looked at his hands as well. "...man, what a rush! We gotta do that again!"

"Say, how many graveyards did you say we'd go through, again?" Callous asked curiously.

"Well, counting this one..." Johnny muttered, as he counted on his fingers. "...I'd say about five. One more, and we should be done for the time being."

"Alright, let's see..." Callous put a finger to her chin while trying to think, and a small grin appeared. "You know...there could be one in Metropolis."

"Metropolis... you mean Eggman's old hideout?" Johnny hummed, before nodding. "Well, that could work, I suppose... let's get moving." As he said that, both of them vanished.

Once they reappeared, they found themselves in some form of desert area, with only a ruined city visible in the distance. "...some place this is..." Johnny noted.

Callous stared at the city in the horizon with interest. She could already tell this city had quite a history, but it was surrounded with a certain wonder that just was apparent to her. She knew many people could have died here, but why?

Who knew...

"...interesting," she murmured.

"...hmph... doesn't quite look like there's a graveyard here..." Johnny muttered, as he folded his arms. "Maybe I should try getting us a bit..." As he spoke, he blinked, as he looked down at the ground. "...hey... there's something off about this area. Like there's..." At that point, he glanced at Callous. "Maybe you should try that thing you

did back in Station Square to gather those souls; I got a hunch about this place."

"You sure you don't wanna give that a try yourself?" Callous asked. "You said you wanted to."

"Well... I can give it a shot." Johnny said, as he opened his hand, creating an orb of darkness. Hurling it into the air, it began swirling and growing, just like when Callous had done the same thing. Soon enough, spirits began slowly emerging from the ground around them; tons of spirits, in fact. Just in the area they were currently at, there seemed to be more spirits than in at least two of the graveyards they had previously visited.

Callous was amazed. "Not bad. It looks like we struck a goldmine here..." then she turned to where the city was. "...to be honest, I've never seen so much death in one place..."

"Yeah..." Johnny muttered, as he looked towards the city as well. "...I really have to wonder what happened around here, for there to be so many spirits around here..." When he glanced back at the orb sucking in spirits, he was somewhat surprised to see that the stream of spirits still didn't let up. "...huh. There must've been some kind of war going on here..."

Callous continued to stare at that city again. "Eggman was here...so maybe it was the time when his Empire finally fell." She could see it now. GUN military troops charging after Eggman's robots, and numerous battleships in the air-"Hm?" Callous didn't count on actually seeing those things, but now the sight was gone, and there was nothing as before.

"...Callous?" Johnny uttered, as he glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "What's-" Before he could ask his question, finally, the spirits being pulled into the dark orb began to thin out, until no further spirits remained. "...well, guess that's all of them in this area... do you think there's more of them in other parts of this land, Callous?"

"I wonder..." Callous slowly turned to Johnny, "...if Eggman's spirit is here."

"...that should be a pretty strong spirit, I'd take it." Johnny muttered, as the orb floated down to them. "And if Sprinter was any indication... we shouldn't push our luck until after we've bagged Jill." Then, he placed a hand on the orb. "Well, time to collect."

Callous placed a hand on the orb as well, but her sights were still set on that city; and on the idea that Eggman's own spirit could possibly dwell here.

In that instant, Johnny dug his nails into the orb, letting the spirits flow into his body. Though this time, the sheer amount of spirits within the orb created a rush much stronger than what he had experienced the last time around.

Callous was certainly taken off guard as she did the same, yet somehow she was still more focused on that city. She could imagine the massive army of robots gathering at the outskirts...and then on the other side of the battlefield only one stood against them. The one with a cocky grin, and limbering up for the battle of the lifetime; Sonic the Hedgehog.

"!" Callous just realized it was some sort of vision, which was made stronger by the spirits she was absorbing. She rubbed her eyelids in some agony, as she also realized that her eyes were hurting.

Blinking, Johnny glanced at Callous. "Hey, Callous! Is something wrong?" he inquired.

"Nothing's wrong, but something weird is going on here," Callous answered, once the orb had been completely absorbed by the two and diminished away. Then she looked back at that city. "...and I'm going to check it out." Without much thought on it, she started off toward the city in a run.

"Wha- hey!" Surprised by that, Johnny quickly ran after her. "Wait up!"

As Callous ran towards the city, she saw Sonic running toward it as well. The robots lunged, and shot, and swung their weapons at the hedgehog, but he was simply just too quick for them. He laughed at them mockingly as he ricocheted off of them like a pinball. He was

making his way to the heart of the city, just when Callous regained sights of reality, and found that she too had made it to the heart of the city. There, if she'd look up, she'd see a collection of towers in the middle of the city. The largest one, she'd probably recognize after a while; it was the same location Metal had forged the temporary prison for the black gem, before Deity had broken out on his own. Though, decades of neglect had rendered the tower pretty much in disrepair, with sizeable holes scattered across the lower floors of the structure. The top part, for some reason, seemed to be in good shape; perhaps a work of the Metallix himself?

"Callous!" Finally, Johnny caught up to Callous, stopping next to her. "Thought you weren't gonna stop... what's up, now?"

Callous didn't answer right away. Looking at the base of the towers, she caught a glimpse of Rouge the Bat collapsing from a shot, and many of Sonic's friends rushing to her side. It was too late, and while the others despaired, Sonic and Shadow angrily ran up the wall of the towers with disastrous speed. That led Callous' eye back up to the tower. "I think Eggman's spirit is in there..." she said.

"...you think?" Johnny mused, as he looked up the tower, tilting his head. "...hm... I still don't think we should rush it just yet." he said, before glancing back at Callous. "Maybe we should power ourselves up just a bit more on some spirits, before testing our luck? He could be tougher than Sprinter was..."

Callous ignored his warning of consideration. "I'm seeing strange things here...and I don't know if you can see them too, but I know I'm seeing them for a reason..." Then she took off again, heading for the towers to look for an entrance inside.

"Hey..." Johnny began, but Callous was already too far away for his warning to be heard. "...tsch... this can't get too pretty." Muttering that, Johnny began running after her.

All Callous could think of was why in the world she didn't see all of this before. She had only been to Metropolis once, and that was to mess with Metal's mind. She had left as quickly as she came, and not at all sensed the things that went on now.

Sonic and Shadow were making their way through the tower in a frenzy. They both tore down any robot in their way, and didn't bother showing them mercy as they decimated the bots into heaps of scrap metal; which Callous actually recalled seeing on her way up. "I'm surprised that this place is still standing," she murmured.

All the while, Johnny was following her as quickly as he could, not even bothering to stop Callous this time around. If it'll make her feel any better... though I still think going up unprepared is a legitimate death sentence. he thought.

Callous finally stopped again to Johnny's hopes, having reached a certain chamber. It looked like the main control room, but this place was all busted up and coated with a thick layer of dust. She saw Sonic and Shadow advancing toward a whimpering Eggman who was sitting on the ground, looking up in true fear at them. Then Callous saw nothing. "Hm..." Why was she seeing these visions?

"...Dr. Eggman?" she called out.

Johnny caught up to Callous, looking around him. "...Callous. There's no one-"

Just then, they could hear chuckling.

Callous looked around slowly and calmly. "Where are you?"

"...where, indeed..." the voice chuckled, as they could hear footsteps around them. "...though, it wouldn't be fair to answer your questions... unless you would be so courteous as to give me your names..."

"...are you seriously..." Johnny muttered, as he rubbed his temples. "...great. A ghost who wants his guests to be polite. Fantastic."

"I would figure you already knew, considering that you could have been watching over this place since you died," Callous answered.

"True..." the voice chuckled. "Though, I am still curious, if even Metal Sonic chose not to cooperate with you in... whatever scheme you've been planning, girl."

"It's better than the schemes you cooked up, that's for sure," Callous retorted, folding her arms.

The voice scoffed. "Though from the looks of it... you don't seem to have gotten far in your plans." he muttered. "If it had been me, I would have put my plans in motion at this point!"

"But if it had been you, the plan would likely have been blown to pieces by a certain hedgehog." Johnny muttered, as he folded his arms.

"Hmph!" the voice scoffed loudly. "Is there a reason for this visit to my chambers, or did you just come here to mock me?"

"Why am I seeing visions of the past?" Callous asked bluntly. "It's not like I'm trying to look into this place; these memories are just coming to me. Since you're a scientist, I figure you have some explanation."

"...I have a theory." the voice said. "I've noticed that little soul-sucking trick you did outdoors... perhaps the memories of the spirits you've consumed are intertwining with your own, creating said visions?"

"If that's the case..." Johnny muttered. "...then why am I seeing squat?"

"I still don't have an answer for that." the voice replied. "Maybe it's because she has a greater connection to the dark force than you do?"

"...why don't you show yourself, old man?" Callous asked.

"Why, indeed." the voice chuckled. "Perhaps it's because it's in my best interests not to be absorbed by one of your tricks, girl."

"Then let me ask you this; why dwell in this place?" Callous asked again. "You really have nothing more to contribute to the world now that you aren't alive anymore."

"Simply put; I can't leave. Not yet." the voice replied. "As advanced as Metal Sonic was before my demise, there's still one last thing I

need to let him know of... so he can easily conquer the world in my place."

Callous raised an eyebrow. "And what would that be?"

"That information is classified, I'm afraid." the voice said. "Only Metal Sonic may learn of it."

"Well you may have to wait a little while, Dr." A sly grin crossed Callous' face. "He's training his *enemy* for her big battle," she sneered.

"...hm." the voice hummed. "He'll return here, eventually."

"Will he? After everything that's happened...I'm not even sure if he wants to try and take over the world anymore," Callous said, continuing to smirk.

"You assume too much, girl." the voice scoffed. "Metal cannot deny it; he was built for the sole purpose of aiding me in conquering the world. It should be second-nature for him to want to conquer it for himself."

"Really now? I seem to know otherwise," Callous paced around proudly. "Like for once, he understands actual physical affection. All thanks to a certain little girl..."

"Nonsense." the voice scoffed. "A machine cannot possibly feel emotion. It's pure and simple logic."

"I wouldn't be too quick to say that." Johnny said, before glancing at Callous. "Tell him all about it."

"This girl still sees some good in him somehow, and she put her faith and trust into him," Callous explained. "At first he was baffled at her actions, but now he's slowly warming up to it. He's even been inspired by her...and had grown close to her without him knowing it."

"...hm..." Humming, the two could hear the voice's owner pacing back and forth somewhere in the shadows. "...it's an impossibility... unless..."

"...unless what?" Johnny uttered.

"...never mind that." Composing himself, the voice's owner cleared his throat. "In any case, I suppose that's all the business you have with me?"

"Clearly seeing as you aren't going to come out and face us, then I guess we'll leave you," Callous answered.

"It would be for the best." the voice said. "Now, begone."

"...hmph." Johnny scoffed, before turning around. "Come on; let's go."

"Maybe we can leave him to Daddy..." Callous chuckled while she started to walk away.

The voice made no reply, leaving the room in utter silence as Callous and Johnny left.

"...hmph... got worried over nothing." Johnny scoffed, as he threw a glance back at the room they left, before looking at Callous. "So, how about continuing where we left off? I bet that there's still more souls lingering around this place."

"As long as we still have time before dawn hits us," Callous said.

"We should still have a few hours, if I'm not mistaken." Johnny replied, as he looked ahead of him. "...plenty of time for some fun after we're done, wouldn't you say?"

Callous chuckled pleasurably as her smirk grew. "That sounds good."

"It does, doesn't it?" Johnny chuckled, as he closed his eyes. "And with all the souls we've absorbed, I feel like I could go on for hours without stopping." As he spoke, he glanced at Callous with a smirk. "You think you can keep up with that?"

Her finger brushed under Johnny's chin playfully. "I'm sure I can."

"That's good." Johnny chuckled. "So, we find one suitable area,

drain all the spirits from there... and then it's down to business, right?"

"Yep," Callous giggled. "Now, only where to look..."

"Well, we got a good deal of souls on the outskirts of town..." Johnny muttered. "...so what about the actual city, itself? I doubt that we'll pull in Eggman, but we might get a large trove of souls from just that."

Once outside, Callous and Johnny traversed to an open area, before she began conjuring up another one of those orbs.

"How long do you think it'll take before we've filled the orb, Callous?" Johnny inquired, as he folded his arms, watching the orb.

"The city's large, so it could hold quite a number of them," Callous said, and once the orb took to the air, rivers of souls did get sucked into it; just like it had been on the outskirts of the city.

"Man, people really got unlucky in this place, didn't they?" Johnny commented, as he folded his arms. "Well, at least they leave us with lots of energy, ripe for the taking."

While it took awhile, it finally took all the souls in the city within its hold, and the large orb floated back down to their reach, where Callous pressed her hand on its surface. "Ready?"

"What do you think?" Johnny replied with a smirk, as he placed his hand on the orb as well.

Callous cracked it open by digging her fingers into its surface, allowing the streams of spiritual energy to be sucked out from it into her. The rush was so great that Callous' arm actually trembled a little. She also breathed more deeply to truly experience the adrenaline. Digging his fingers into the orb as well, the surge of the spirits flowing into Johnny's body was intense, as his entire body trembled with excitement from the rush. Once the orb was finally gone, it took Callous a minute to register and she smirked to herself as she felt that amazing power she had built up all through the night. Breathing heavily in order to come to terms with the power he had

amassed, Johnny couldn't help but laugh.

"That just doesn't get old, no matter how often I do it!" he said.

"You said it," Callous remarked.

"Speaking of..." Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at Callous. "...there's one other thing that never gets old, no matter how often it's done... and

frankly, it's way overdue."

Callous' smirk grew, as she went to Johnny and touched his chest. "Let's go somewhere so we're not being watched, shall we?" she said.

"That sounds like a plan." Johnny said, as he wrapped his arms around Callous' neck, looking straight into her eyes. "Though, here's a fair warning; if you thought that I was rough before... this time around, I'm going to be exceptionally brutal. But I'm sure you can handle that... right, Callous?"

"Who do you think I am? Bliss?" Then Callous chuckled. "Sure I can handle it."

"That's all I needed to know." Johnny chuckled. "Where to? It's your call."

Somewhere no one can bother us," Callous murmured. After thinking, she got something. "...the dark."

"...sounds just perfect." Johnny said, as he closed his eyes, letting a gateway of Corruption open up underneath the two of them. "Shall we?"

Callous pulled Johnny closer to her as they sank down into the gateway. "Yes, we shall."

Smirking, Johnny quickly made his move, and kissed Callous deeply, before the two sank completely into the darkness.

Chapter 68

CHAPTER – SIXTY-EIGHT

Jill's eyes popped open in the early morning. The first thing she noticed was that her stomach was more upset that it ever was. Obviously Callous and Johnny had decided to do whatever they were doing again, but it was so...strong. Jill didn't count on having to leave the cave, and going to a secluded place outside where she literally hurled right there.

Gazing at her puke on the ground, she trembled weakly as she held fast to the rock wall beside her. She noticed that she had accidentally gotten some on her arm, so she pulled off her green jacket. Then her eyes fell upon a horrible sight, making her jaw drop. "..no..."

There were strange markings across her arms. Hurriedly pulling off the gloves, she saw that the markings from her hands had stretched throughout her arms. Her eyes widened in pure, speechless shock.

"Jill?" she'd eventually hear Metal call from a distance away. *"Where did that girl go...? Jill, where are you?"*

Jill jumped, and out of fear hid her arms from sight. "I'm...I'm over here..." she uttered.

Soon, the Metallix approached Jill from behind, looking down at not only her, but the puke on the ground as well. *"...hm. Whatever happened to 'I don't hurl'?"* Metal mused, as he folded his arms. *"Told you that you'd need the bucket."*

"...I guess I was proven wrong..." she muttered.

"Well, no matter." Metal said with a shrug. *"After tomorrow, you won't have to worry about that ever again."* Then, he pointed behind him. *"Now, come on; you should probably wash yourself. And your jacket as well; looks like you got a bit of vomit on there."*

Jill was afraid to turn around, but she knew that Metal would find out sooner or later, and she mind as well get it over with now. She turned around looking at Metal sadly, and Metal then saw the state of her arms.

"...what in..." Metal uttered in complete surprise, quickly grabbing one of Jill's arms. *"How the... but the..."* This came as such a surprise to the Metallix, that he was even unable to finish a single sentence.

"...I don't know how it happened..." Jill said, likely answering the questions that Metal tried to ask. Not only that, but Metal's hadn't grown at all; in fact, it kinda looked like they shrank a bit, but not too much to be noticeable.

...somehow... Metal thought, as he let go of that arm. *.. .I have a sneaking suspicion as to why...* Shaking his head, he looked at Jill. *"...well... they haven't caused any harm, have they? It's worrying that they've stretched out, but... as long as they don't hurt, all we need is to take care of Deity and Callous, and they might just vanish altogether."*

"...maybe..." Jill didn't seem all that positive about it and she looked away at the ground.

"...hey, cheer up." Metal said, as he placed a finger under Jill's chin, gently pushing her head up. *"And keep your chin up, too. Come tomorrow, you won't have to worry about Callous pestering you any longer. And after that, we'll move on to take down Deity. Right?"*

Jill was amazed at that unusually gentle gesture Metal did, but found the strength to lighten up. "Right," she answered.

"That's good." Metal said, before turning around. *"Now, let's get you washed up; after that, you just tell me when you feel ready for training."*

Jill reached down and picked up her jacket, but with the after-weakness of having thrown up, she had a little trouble getting back up.

"Here, let me..." At that point, Metal took hold of Jill's arm, before helping her properly on her feet. *"You'll be alright?"*

"I hope so," Jill answered. Then she faintly smiled at Metal. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it." Metal responded. *"Just looking out for you. Come along, now."* he said, as he led Jill towards the spring.

They were silent while walking through the woods and reaching the spring. Jill knelt down by its edge, dipping the parts of her jacket that she had gotten vomit on and rubbing them out to cleanse in the water. Once she was done with that, she took some of the water and splashed her face.

Watching her clean up, Metal closed his eyes, as his thoughts drifted. *...those markings...* he thought. *...did Goddess' sacrifice have something to do with that?* Opening his eyes, Metal folded his arms, as he looked away from Jill. *...she needs to survive tomorrow... no matter what.*

Jill wiped her brow from some of the dripping water, and slowly stood up as she looked across the water. Such a beautiful sight, and Jill knew that today was the last day she would get to see this. Thinking about the battle, something occurred to her. "...you know, I wonder why Callous hasn't contacted us about the battle..." she said. "...I'm not even sure if we're supposed to meet somewhere for it."

Hearing that, Metal glanced at Jill, before closing his eyes. *"...I'm sure that she'd just come and seek us out, regardless of location. You, of all people, should know how she operates..."*

"Yeah...but even nowadays, she's started to act more unpredictably; even more so than I can keep track of," Jill answered. "...last night I felt something really weird from her while I was trying to sleep. I couldn't tell exactly what it was, but it wasn't normal for her..."

"...something weird?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at Jill with an interested expression. *"Can you explain it?"*

"...I think for the first time in her life," Jill tried to think back on what it was, finding the right word for it. "...she felt remorse for something."

"...remorse? Her?" Uttering those words, Metal tilted his head. *"...yeah, that's weird on too many levels to count."*

"It was definitely covered in a lot of denial, that's for sure," Jill continued. "But another weird thing was that...I actually felt sorry for her."

"...okay, we've officially crossed the line between 'weird' and 'absurd' here." Metal said in disbelief. *"Just what could she have been doing that made you feel sorry for her?"*

"I honestly don't know," Jill said, while stroking back her hair with a hand. "But it wasn't her at all, and I never thought I'd feel sympathy for her." Thinking how unusual that behavior was in Callous, it somehow reminded the moments where Jill didn't feel like herself either. Times when an overwhelming boost of confidence appeared, and she ended up saying something or doing something that was outside of her nature.

"...I think our personalities are getting mixed up somehow..." she suddenly said.

Hearing Jill say that, Metal looked down at the ground, recalling the sparring match he had with Silver the other day; how he had started to act more like Sonic. *"...well, she was made in your image, so..."* he muttered. *"...never mind. If you want to speak to someone about cloning and what effects it could have, Eggman would've been the best choice, were he still alive."*

That brought up another curious thought in Jill. "You know...if Sonic and his friends contacted me from the dead...then wouldn't Eggman's spirit have done something of the same?" Then she shook her head. "Well, I guess it depends whether or not if he had something that held him back. Sonic and his friends had unfinished business with what happened to Angel Island and Deity, but I can't think of anything Eggman might have needed to take care of."

"I wouldn't know." Metal shrugged. *"Remember, I was knocked*

offline before Eggman died, so I don't know the nature behind his death. Besides, do you think he would've degraded himself to cooperate with Sonic, even in death?"

"...I really don't know; I guess not," Jill answered. "But it was just a thought..."

"Of course." Metal nodded. *"It could hold some kind of plausibility, but unless either of us figure out how Eggman died... well, we can only theorize, until then."*

Jill wondered if the stories Tails told had anything to offer. There was one tale that only she had been told, and the old fox shared it with some sadness. The adventures had taken them directly to Metropolis, where it was said that Eggman's Empire had been ended for good. "...have you ever looked for anything back in Metropolis, Metal?" she asked curiously, turning back to him.

"...I haven't had the chance to go to Metropolis lately." Metal shrugged. *"After I was reactivated, I spent some time to gain knowledge of what had happened while I was offline. Since then, I got together the robots that Sonic and his friends hadn't destroyed, took over Westopolis and Green Hill Zone, and... well, apart from making a small cell for the black gem, I've been too busy to spend time in that city."*

This only served to feed her curiosity more. "...I want to take a look around there for myself..." Jill said.

"...really?" Metal uttered in a curious tone, before he rubbed his chin. *"...hmm... well, we could check it out... but isn't that going to detract from your training?"*

"Not too much," Jill said.

"...hm." Humming, Metal closed his eyes. *"...well... why not? Maybe both of us could learn something there."* he said, before looking up at the sky. *"...if we go now, we may still have time to return here and sufficiently train you in aerial combat."*

"And we might be able to get back before Silver wakes up too," Jill

said. "We could even use Chaos Control to speed things up even more."

"Well, naturally." Metal chuckled. *"Last I checked, Metropolis isn't just a few blocks away. We'll be depending on Chaos Control to get there and back again in as little time as possible."* Then, he turned away from Jill. *"Just tell me when you're ready to go, and I'll take us there."*

Once Jill stuck her arms back into her jacket and put it back on completely, she nodded. "Let's go."

"Very well." Metal chuckled, before opening his eyes. *"Chaos Control!"* Before Jill would know it, both of them had vanished from sight.

Metal took them straight into the city ruins part of it; otherwise known as the Ancient Relics to many. The minute Jill comprehended where they were, so many things started to weigh her down. Her stomach had grown upset all over again, and thankfully she didn't have anything to barf up this time, but she also could feel horrible things here.

"There's...so much negativity here," she uttered. It almost even felt like she might have a heart attack, because her heart was beating so fast out of fear for this place.

"Well, it was the home of the world's biggest criminal." Metal said with a shrug. *"Try to not let it get to you."*

Jill looked around. This place was strange to her, and so...empty. Not that it was visibly uninhabited (well, besides Metal) but the life from the place itself withered away over the time of its own emptiness. While that part could have been understood, there was something else Jill picked up. It seemed a lot more empty than it should...

...so why did it still feel like she was being watched?

Jill ignored the shivers down her spine, as she took her first few steps on the street.

Whilst she did that, Metal looked past the buildings, as his eyes stopped at the sight of some structures towering above the buildings; namely, some towers in the center of the city. *"...there it is..."* he muttered, before he followed Jill.

She couldn't think of how such a big battle could have taken place here. Jill wondered just how intense it was, thinking about how Tails, and Sonic and the rest of his friends were pushing through Eggman's defenses. Her imagination must have grown more wilder than she imaged, because she swore that she started to see some of his friends thrashing through the wall of robots-"!" she gasped and stopped, seeing that nothing was really going on.

But she knew she saw something just a second ago.

"...Jill?" Metal uttered, as he tilted his head. *"You alright?"*

"I-I'm alright," Jill tried to assure without a very convincing tone. "I just thought I saw something is all..."

"...really..." Metal uttered; while Jill's tone utterly contradicted her words, he decided not to press the issue. *"...I'm not sure if we'll find much of significance in the relics. Perhaps we should move onto the main part of Metropolis?"*

"Sure," Jill answered. Then she looked behind her; still feeling like she was being watched.

"...hmph." Deciding to ignore that, Metal took hold of Jill's arm, before taking to the sky, flying towards the towers in the heart of Metropolis. Jill just remained patiently silent as they flew.

Soon enough, the two got to the tallest tower, which Metal entered via one of the holes in its lower structure. *"Once we've dealt with Callous and Deity, I should get this place properly cleaned up."* the Metallix mused.

"I thought you would've fixed the entire tower..." Jill murmured. Once they landed on solid ground, Jill looked at the wreckage. Some piles of torn up robots were lying around the place-and Sonic and Shadow pushed past them as they were making their way up the

halls-and Jill gasped again. She looked in the exact direction she thought she saw the two hedgehogs go, and without warning, starting running the same way herself.

Of course, as Metal was still holding onto her, she unwittingly pulled the Metallix along with her. *"ERK! What's gotten into you, all of a sudden?"* he managed to say.

"I know I saw something!" Jill only replied, as she ran her way up through the tower without rest; that is, until they reached a certain room. It was the same ruined control room, and before Jill's eyes, she saw the two hedgehogs advancing on the frightened scientist on the ground. It almost seemed like they would do him in...but Sonic suddenly held Shadow back with a hand.

Jill was amazed. *...Sonic and Shadow...didn't kill him?* She thought.

"...Jill, just what is going on?" Metal uttered, as he looked around him. *"There's nothing here, aside from machinery. Are you really sure that you saw anything at all?"*

"But I was sure that..." Jill realized that she saw nothing now, and the minute she entered into the room, a bad vibe rushed over her. "...I don't know if I really saw anything Metal...but right now I'm getting a really bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?" Metal uttered, as he tilted his head. *"What kind of-"* In that instant, both of them heard someone laugh, though the very sound of it caused Metal's eyes to widen.

He recognized that laughter.

It was definitely unnerving for Jill, but instead of letting her fear get ahead of herself, she looked around. "Hello?" she called out.

"Well, well, well... this is most certainly a surprise." the voice's owner chuckled. "This is the second pair of guests I've had today..."

The more he heard this voice, the more visibly uneasy Metal became, as he looked frantically around him. *"...it's... not possible..."* he uttered. *"It... it can't be... him?"*

"Him?" Seeing Metal's behavior like that was plenty enough for Jill to make the connection. "...Dr. Eggman? Is...that you?" Then something else she recalled made her question, "Wait, the second pair of guests? Who were the first?"

"A pair of unpleasant people, to say the least." the voice uttered. "I believe one of them... looked just like you, girl. Callous was her name, if I recall correctly."

"...so Callous and Johnny were here?" Metal uttered, as he looked around him. *"...damn it, Eggman, show yourself!"*

"My, oh my... you seem surprised, Metal Sonic." At that point, someone walked out of the darkness, and in spite of the spectral affinities to this man, the attire, facial features, and the massive moustache was a dead giveaway. "I never programmed you to show surprise."

Yes, this was indeed the ghost of Doctor Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik.

Jill's eyes grew small and wide. "...well, looks like we found him Metal," she croaked.

"...d-doctor..." Metal uttered, actually taking a step back from the ghost, who could only laugh.

"Well, it seems like Callous was right! You being with this girl seems to have affected you in more ways than one, Metal Sonic!" Eggman laughed, as he folded his arms behind his back.

"...Callous was..." Metal said in surprise, as he tilted his head.

Jill actually started growing less afraid now. She stood taller and eyed the ghost suspiciously. "What was Callous doing here?"

"From what I could gather," Eggman began, as he began walking around Metal and Jill, rubbing his moustache in thought, "she was using these powers of hers to pull spirits into her own body, along with her partner. Though what purpose this would serve her currently escapes me, I decided that it would be wise not to allow her to properly lay eyes on me."

"...pull spirits into her body?" Metal said in disbelief, before looking at Jill. *"You don't suppose that... she's doing something akin to what Deity pulled with Knuckles's spirit?"*

Jill was only all the more shocked to hear this news. "...I can't believe she figured out how to do it..." she uttered. "...and Johnny figured it out too!" This actually made her a little mad, and she kicked a nearby piece of scrap metal before sighing. "...it's going to be a lot harder to beat her now that she's absorbed all those souls..." she said.

"...but not impossible." Metal said, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. *"She may have beefed herself up, but you've had superior combat training from me. The way I see it, you two are just on equal ground; something you will overcome."*

"...hmph. It's a rarity to see you acting like that, Metal Sonic." Eggman noted, which caused the Metallix to glare at the ghost. "Either the girl has been a stronger influence on you than either of you think... or there's something else behind it."

Jill looked back at Eggman. "What are you getting at?"

"...tell me, Metal..." Eggman began, though he stopped himself. "...on second thought, never mind. Your current form tells me what I need to know."

"...which is...?" Metal uttered, as he tilted his head.

"Don't act so dense; I know you're capable of better thought processing than that." Eggman scoffed, before turning to face Jill and Metal. "The data from Chaos still is a part of you, with the proper modifications in place... nothing that I knew could have an effect on the data, should be able to affect it at all."

Jill looked back and forth between Eggman and Metal. Then something clicked. "...Nothing you knew Eggman..." Jill said, opening her hand. "...but something that me and Callous may know." A ball of bright pale green Purity energy took form above her palm.

Seeing that ball, Eggman chuckled. "Aah... yes. That might explain a lot." he said, before looking at Metal. "I take it that you can accomplish the same thing, given your ability to copy data, Metal?"

"...naturally." Metal nodded, as he held out his hands, one of them creating a ball of Purity, and the other a ball of Corruption. *"The green energy is called Purity, which Jill here excels with using. The dark energy is Corruption, and that is Callous' forte. Put two and two together..."* At that point, both of the balls turned dark-green . *"...and you get Unity; an energy of my creation."* After saying that, the two balls dispersed.

"...I see... very interesting..." Eggman hummed, as he walked a small distance from the two, rubbing his moustache in thought.

Jill watched Eggman with curiosity, and also thinking that he was a little strange.

"...tell me... Jill, was it?" Eggman inquired, as he looked at the two from over his shoulder. "Has Metal Sonic been acting... differently in the time you've spent with him?"

Somehow, that question only served to irritate the Metallix. *"You know, I'm standing right here; you could just as well ask me."*

"And then what? Get an dishonest answer in order for you to not lose face?" Eggman uttered, before turning to face the two. "I can tell that your friend there might be more honest with me than you will, Metal Sonic. So, Jill... answer my question."

"...he's changed," Jill answered. "I guess that's the most simple way of saying it."

That answer, however, didn't seem to be enough for the scientist, as he scowled in annoyance. "Yes, but what changes?" he pressed. "How do you expect me to make a deduction with such simplistic answers, girl?"

Jill looked at Metal to think of what she wanted to say. "...he's started express actual emotions." she said. Thinking of the breakdowns he had, Jill couldn't dare describe them to Eggman for

the sake of Metal's dignity.

"...emotions...?" Eggman uttered with interest, as he glanced at the Metallix, who looked away. "...interesting... what kind of emotions?" he inquired, as he looked back at Jill.

Jill felt uncomfortable, averting her eyes away from Eggman. "...Anguish..." She hoped that Metal wouldn't be mad at her for doing this. "...Concern..." Just as long as she wasn't too specific on the details. "...Content..."

"I see..." Eggman mused, as he urged for Jill to continue. "Do go-"

"Anger." Metal suddenly intervened, as he looked up at Eggman. *"Joy. Sadness... Guilt..."*

Jill looked at Metal.

"...and... that's pretty much it." Metal said, before looking away from Eggman.

"...interesting..." Eggman mused, as he rubbed his moustache. "All of those emotions only come from living beings... not something a machine would show." As he spoke, he approached Metal. "But you... I'd stake my very existence on this; you're becoming more man than machine, Metal Sonic."

Jill remembered the tears Metal cried. A machine couldn't hope to do that either, and she knew the veracity of what Eggman was saying. "But how? Why?" Jill asked.

"I have a theory, regarding that." Eggman said proudly, as he looked down at Metal. "The Chaos Data."

"...that data?" Metal uttered, as he looked up at Eggman. *"But... you perfected the flaws from the first time you placed that data within me! How can it-"*

"Don't you see it, yet?" Eggman scoffed, as he tapped his head. "I believe that those three forces; Purity, Corruption and Unity... they're having an adverse effect on that data. That may be the cause of your... unnatural behavior."

...It all makes sense, Jill thought in realization with widened eyes.

"...so..." Metal uttered, as he looked at his hands. *"...those three forces... have been the cause of my behavior all along?"*

"It's only a theory, though; the data of Chaos is unpredictable." Eggman noted, before he broke into a loud laughter. "Still, this is a scientific breakthrough! Truly, my genius shines through, even after my time!" he laughed.

Jill rolled her eyes. "The Professor was right. You did boast about yourself..." And that reminded her of something. "...Dr. Eggman," she said. "...Sonic and Shadow didn't kill you...so how did you die?"

Upon hearing that question, Eggman's laugh died out, as he looked down at Jill and Metal. "...how I died, huh...?"

"...I, too, am curious." Metal inquired. *"After all, from what I recall, you sent me out to kill Sonic after the death of Rouge the Bat, and by that time, you were still alive. So... how did you die?"*

"...well..." Eggman began, as he cleared his throat. "...it's a long story... you might want to take a seat."

Jill saw a place to sit, and took it, looking at Metal to wait for him to sit.

It didn't take long for the Metallix to take a seat as well, as he looked at Eggman in curiosity.

"...right... how I died..." Eggman muttered, as he folded his arms behind his back. "...well, I suppose I should start with when Rouge died." he began, as he scowled. "I never even intended to kill her; I was merely using her as bait to lure Sonic into a deathtrap. But she sprung it to protect him, at the cost of her own life."

Jill thought back at the video of Sonic and Tails fighting Metal one last time. Before the confrontation, they mentioned something about Rouge. *...so that's what happened,* she thought. Tails neglected to tell that detail...

"Of course, everyone got the wrong idea, and assumed that I killed

her in cold blood." Eggman continued, as he pressed his fingers against his glasses. "And, as you might have imagined, Shadow wasn't exactly pleased by that. In fact, she died in his arms."

"...hm. I can imagine how he must've felt." Metal uttered.

"In any case, her death spelled nothing but disaster; Shadow had every intention of returning the favor, and went directly after me, forcing me to retreat. Though, in the end, both him and Sonic cornered me, and even I thought that I would be dead at that point..."

"...but they didn't do it," Jill said. "Not Sonic anyway..."

"...indeed." Eggman nodded. "While Sonic was indeed angered by Rouge's death, he'd never want to stoop down to the level of a killer. He even persuaded Shadow to let me live, and allow the authorities to take care of me."

"...but they didn't." Metal noted. *"Otherwise, you couldn't have sent out me to fight Sonic."*

"You catch on quickly, Metal." Eggman chuckled, before clearing his throat. "Anyways... I feel that I owe you an apology, Metal Sonic. For you see... I didn't count on you being able to defeat Sonic; in fact, I expected you to lose."

Hearing that, however, caused Metal to stand up from his chair, glaring at the doctor. *"...what?"* he uttered in a venomous tone.

Jill was taken aback at that. She also watched Metal's reaction cautiously.

"...you mean to tell me..." Metal uttered, as he clenched his hands together. *"...that I was nothing but a pawn?"*

"...yes." Eggman nodded, as he didn't lose his cool; mostly, because he knew that Metal had no way of actually harming him. "If you would have succeeded in killing Sonic, that would have been fair enough. But the reason I sent you out... was to keep Sonic busy."

"...for what reason?" Jill asked.

"To perfect my ultimate weapon; the one thing I was certain that not even Sonic the Hedgehog could best." Eggman said, as he closed his eyes. "While Tails was recovering from the battle against Metal, I made the finishing touches to my weapon, before contacting Sonic in private, telling him that we were to finish our feud once and for all; without any outside interference." Then, he stopped, gritting his teeth.

"...but I take it that your ultimate weapon failed?" Metal inquired.

"...it didn't fail..." Eggman said with great restraint, before he suddenly began jumping up and down in sheer, yet slightly comedic anger. "IT NEVER GOT OFF THE GROUND! THAT DAMN HEDGEHOG GOT TO METROPOLIS BEFORE I COULD EVEN GET IT TO RUN!"

Oh the humanity, Jill thought, plainly amused by Eggman's anger. But that meant something to Jill which wiped her smile off her face. "Then whatever this weapon is...does it still exist to this day?"

After he finished his little tirade, Eggman quickly composed himself, readjusting his glasses. "Naturally. In fact, Sonic never even knew about its existence. Due to him being too quick for me to react properly, I needed to improvise; I used a mech suit, in an attempt to finally kill him."

"...and it backfired?" Metal uttered.

"No, it didn't!" Eggman said, before groaning. "I was beaten, fair and square... however, my pride had taken a bigger blow than I anticipated, and even with the damaged mech, I still challenged Sonic to fight me."

"...then what?" Jill asked again, hoping for him to continue.

"...he beat me again." Eggman muttered, as he looked down at the ground. "But I challenged him again... and he defeated me. Again and again, even as the mech got in worse shape, I refused to admit defeat; I wanted that hedgehog six feet under."

"...then what happened?" Metal pressed on.

"...one of the engines suffered a meltdown, due to the intense stress I put it through." Eggman replied, as he looked away from the two. "It caused an explosion within the mech which, while not killing me, still caused me to suffer griveous wounds."

I can only imagine what Sonic was thinking when he went through that experience, Jill thought.

"With wounds like that, I grew increasingly desperate." Eggman continued, as he looked back down at the two. "With what strength I could muster, I got my Egg-o-Matic to take me to this very chamber, where I could activate my ultimate weapon... however, once I got here, I realized that I wouldn't survive long enough to see Sonic's demise."

"...so you died here... a victim of your own arrogance." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...hmph... certainly not the ending I assumed you would have."*

"...and Sonic died at someone else's hand..." Jill muttered to herself as she closed her eyes. That moment, her stomach started twisting again and she groaned, while clutching her stomach. *Agh, Callous...not again,* she thought irritably.

That caused Metal to look at Jill with some concern. *"...are you alright?"* he inquired.

Just then, Eggman cleared his throat, as he folded his arms, looking at Jill with an annoyed expression. "I wasn't finished yet."

"...go ahead," Jill muttered, trying to ignore the stomach ache.

"Thank you." Eggman scoffed, as he looked around the room. "As life faded from my body, I had a sneaking suspicion that some time after my passing, Metal would resurface. That is why I quickly stored all data regarding my ultimate weapon in a restricted file, locked by a password which only I have the knowledge of."

"...so..." Metal uttered, as he glanced at Eggman. *"...you intended to impart that password to me?"*

"Of course." Eggman said with a chuckle. "I had a short video

recorded, but... well, here I am."

Jill had a good feeling where this was going, and her head hung low. "...and you were going to give him the rights to that weapon...so he could take over the world."

"Of course!" Eggman laughed. "Why, what else is there for him to make of himself? He was created as my servant, and there isn't a thing in the world that can change that; not even my death!"

Metal was silent, as he looked away from Eggman, closing his eyes.

Jill stood up. She had expected Eggman to see things that way and she didn't look up. In fact, she closed her eyes. "You're wrong Eggman."

Blinking, Eggman looked curiously at Jill. "...hm?"

Metal, too, looked at Jill with a curious expression.

"I don't understand anything about machines; I lived a pretty sheltered life if you ask me," Jill said. "But I was taught that life in all shapes and sizes is precious. At first we conflicted, but later I saw something in Metal. I didn't see someone who's sole purpose was to obey the commands of a dictator or to take the life of their image." She looked up at Eggman sternly. "I saw someone...who was trapped. Like me."

"...trapped?" Eggman uttered, before laughing. "What nonsense! Why would a machine feel trapped? Girl, you do not cease to amaze me!" Then, he stopped laughing, before looking down at the two. "What makes you think that you know anything about Metal Sonic? He's my creation, and I created him to be a killing machine! The only thing you're seeing about him is an corrupted A.I, damaged by that very force you can utilize!"

As Eggman spoke, Metal looked away from Jill, his eyes closing again.

"You say that being able to feel emotions is corrupted?" Jill asked calmly. "Eggman, that's a gift, not a curse."

"Ah, how naïve you are, girl!" Eggman laughed. "Being able to feel emotions isn't a curse, of course... but for a machine, it's absolutely unheard of! The only reason he's feeling them in the first place is because his A.I. is damaged, or as we scientists prefer to call it, corrupted!"

Jill shook her head. "And it's that kind of arrogance that got you killed in the end." She looked at Eggman. "There's probably no way of convincing you Eggman, but there's no way of convincing me either. I know what true corruption is; I've seen it for myself. Metal isn't corrupted."

"Hmph!" Eggman scoffed. "I wouldn't expect a simpleton like you to understand how a machine works..." Then, he smirked. "...but corrupted or not, he cannot deny his nature. Metal... kill her."

Hearing that made Metal look up at Eggman in surprise. *"...what?"*

Jill didn't expect that move, and she quickly looked at Metal. "Metal, you have freedom now. You don't have to listen to him anymore."

"Oh, don't bother." Eggman chuckled. "I didn't even need to say that; in the end, he would likely kill you anyway. That's the kind of personality Metal Sonic has."

Metal glared at Eggman, before looking down at the ground.

"Why delay the inevitable? Kill her now, Metal!" Eggman said, as his grin grew wider.

"Eggman...I already knew he might have killed me," Jill said. "Even now, I know he might kill me...but I still trust him." And she looked at Metal to see what he would do. She was taking pretty big leap of faith here, and deep down, she actually was afraid that Metal would kill her right there.

However, in that instant, Metal did something that neither Jill or Eggman would have expected the Metallix to do.

He laughed.

It wasn't just a chuckle, or a mocking laughter; no, this loud,

boisterous laugh, that rang all throughout the empty tower, along with the entire city, was one of genuine amusement.

However, Eggman was not as amused. "Metal, what's the meaning of this! Cut that nonsense out, and kill her, already!" he said, though that did absolutely nothing to stop Metal's laugh.

Jill blinked, since that laughter totally came out of nowhere.

After a while, the laughter began to subside, though Metal still seemed like he was prone to another outburst. *"Eggman, do you take me for some manner of fool?"*

Hearing that, Eggman scowled. "...what was that?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but at the moment, this girl isn't going to die." Metal said, as he shook his head. *"Both she and I have more important things to deal with than petty matters such as what morals I really have, and whether or not I'm just a mindless killing machine."* Then, he turned towards the door, though he glanced at Eggman over his shoulder. *"...and I do not take orders from ghosts."*

Jill was a bit relieved at that response, and at least it sounded like something Metal would say rather than having it come out completely one way or the other. What he said also kind of made her feel a little stupid for fighting over something like that, and she scratched her head a little sheepishly.

"Now, I believe that we're finished here." Metal said, as he began walking towards the door. *"Come along, Jill."*

"...where do you think you're going, Metal Sonic?" Eggman suddenly snapped, as he glared at the Metallix. "You may try to hide it, but you cannot deny what your purpose really is! Sooner or later, you'll come back here and attempt to take over the world, as you were supposed to! Do you hear me?"

Jill obediently followed Metal without making a single reply to Eggman's yelling.

"...get back here, already!" Eggman yelled. "Are you just abandoning

the very same man who brought you into existence? The same man who outfitted you with a purpose?"

"That man is dead." Metal replied, as he stopped just by the door, without looking at Eggman. *"I no longer have an obligation to follow his word."*

Jill went ahead and left out the door, walking down the hall to travel down the towers, since she knew Metal would eventually follow.

"Now, I believe that this is farewell, Eggman." Metal said, as he prepared to follow Jill.

"...at least let me give you the password!" Eggman yelled again. "You owe it to me, at the very least!"

Stopping, Metal glared back at Eggman, his patience wearing thin. *"...if it will get you to shut up, then fine."* he muttered, as he turned around and walked hurriedly towards Eggman.

"Ah, splendid." Eggman said, composing himself eerily fast. "Now, you can access the files on any computer in this room. It's the folder marked 'Restricted'; so simplistic that even a monkey could-"

"Just give me the damn password, so I can get you out of my life." Metal intervened, glaring up at Eggman.

"...very well." Smirking, Eggman leant in close to Metal, whispering into his ear. "...revenge."

"...that's it?" Metal scoffed. *"How unimaginative."* With that, he turned and walked away, exiting the room.

"Unimaginative, maybe..." Eggman chuckled, as his very being slowly began fading away. "...but incredibly fitting, nonetheless." After that, his spirit completely vanished.

Jill was halfway down the tower when another stomach ache hit her again, and she slowed down with a groan. *Good grief Callous,* she thought. Eventually she made it back outside into the city again, and

she stopped so that she could wait for Metal.

Then something caught her eye, and she quickly looked.

A dark figure was standing there, staring at her. No matter how much training she had gone through, those pale eyes struck fear into her the minute her eyes fell upon that figure. "...no..." Just as soon as she had seen him, he was gone. Blinking, she rubbed her eyes and looked again, and there was still nothing. *...I wonder if that was just like before when I saw...* but part of her was certainly not going to sleep well tonight.

She thought she had seen Deity Novagod standing there.

"Sorry about that; I had some unfinished business to take care of." At that point, Metal approached her from behind, noticing that she was looking off towards the city. *"...Jill? Is something the matter?"*

"...nothing," Jill answered straight. "I think some paranoia is just causing me to see things..."

"I see..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...do you think you'll be good to start training when we return?"* he inquired.

"Probably," Jill said. Then her stomach turned again. "Ecgh..." she grumbled.

"Still?" Metal said in disbelief. *"Hrm... we'll need to let you lie down, until she decides to call it quits; you're not going to train a lot if you keep getting stomach-aches."*

"...no. I've taken enough time off training already," Jill said. "I'll just cope with it..."

"...if you say so..." Metal muttered, as he sighed. *"Just don't overdo it."* In that instant, the two of them vanished.

Meanwhile, back up at the tower, a dark mist began to drift into the room that the two of them had been in not to long ago. Then slow footsteps entered the room, and those pale purple eyes surveyed around the damaged facility. However, apart from the computer

consoles scattered about, there was nothing of particular interest that he saw in the room; Eggman's spirit had vanished, likely having passed on after fulfilling his purpose.

"Hm. Seems I missed my opportunity," the figure muttered. "...just as well as the hordes of spirits that previously rested in the grains of these soils. Shame." Then he turned and left the room. "No matter. I still have yet to find the body of the blue hedgehog to claim his spirit..." and the black mists dissipated.

Chapter 69

CHAPTER – SIXTY-NINE

As the morning sun rose above the forest of Mystic Ruins, Jack just happened to wake up, sitting up in his bed and rubbing his eyes drowsily. "Hrm... are the others up, yet?" he uttered, as he moved out of the bed, walking towards the door. "Maybe I should check on them..." As he uttered that to himself, he yawned, as he opened the door...

...only to see a cloaked person with a hat covering his face and a large rifle on his back sitting with his back against the wall, directly opposite of him. "...Lock...?"

"...mrhm..." Lock mumbled, as he seemed to be asleep.

Now Brick came out of his room not too far down the hall, and was happily whistling along since now he was wearing his nose ring again. He was amazed that no one said anything about his bandaged nose, but he didn't really give any more thought to that; especially since he was the next one to notice the sleeping Lock in the hall. "Huh?"

Blinking, Jack glanced drowsily towards Brick. "...why is Lock sleeping in the hallway, Brick...?" he said, before looking back at the sleeping bounty hunter. "...am I still dreaming...?"

"And he tells me I'm creepy..." Brick murmured under his breath while staring at Lock. "...no Jack, you're not dreaming. But how in the world did he get in here?"

"...and isn't it uncomfortable to sleep like that?" Jack muttered, just as he noticed something about Lock's rifle; namely, the fact that most of its barrel was missing. "...what happened to his gun?"

Brick leaned his head to the side to observe it. "...It didn't just fall off; the edges look too smooth for that," he added. "It was sliced off by something, and knowing Lock's profession..." he looked back at

Lock. "...he must've have an eventful night."

"...maybe that's why he's sleeping against the wall." Jack presumed, as he glanced at Brick. "Maybe we should get him into a bed?"

Brick looked at Lock a minute longer in wondering. "...nah, just leave him. I'm sure he's alright," he said, as he went ahead past the two. "...but it still doesn't explain what he's doing here," he muttered to himself.

"Hmm..." Jack hummed, as he tilted his head, looking down at Lock. "...maybe we could ask him." he noted, before gently poking Lock's hat.

The moment he did that, however, Lock suddenly grabbed hold of his rifle with one hand, aiming it squarely at Jack, who backed away in surprise. "...oh. Hello, Jack." Lock uttered, before hanging his rifle over his back again. "Please don't do that while I'm asleep."

"...what was that for?" Jack uttered, still a bit surprised that Lock pulled his rifle on him without any warning.

"...I thought you were an enemy. But you're not." Lock shrugged.

Brick had stopped when he heard what happened, and turned around. "And that's why you don't disturb a sleeping bounty hunter." Then he walked back to the two. "What are you doing here, Lock?" he asked him.

"...I'm keeping an eye on you." Lock replied bluntly. "To make sure that you're safe."

"...safe from what?" Jack uttered, as he tilted his head.

"...certain lowlifes..." Lock muttered, as he got to his feet, glancing at Brick. "Do you have a workshop in this clubhouse?"

"Yeah, it's down the hall near my room," Brick directed with a point. Lock could very well fix his own gun probably, so Brick knew he didn't have to offer his help.

"...I see." Lock nodded, as he began making his way down the hall.

"I'll be there for a while."

As he walked down the hall, Jack noticed the hole in Lock's coat, along with the markings on his back. "...those..." he uttered in surprise.

Brick recognized those markings, and watched in shock Lock opened the door to the shop and left inside. Then he looked at Jack when Lock closed the door behind him speechlessly.

"...so..." Jack uttered, as he glanced at Brick. "...he ran into Callous...?"

"...and he's still alive?" Brick muttered.

"...Brick..." Jack uttered, as he glanced at Brick. "...when he talked about 'lowlifes'... do you think he meant Callous?"

"...I wouldn't doubt it," Brick said, turning and walking away down the hallway. "But let's figure out how he got in here; and I think I might have an idea who let him in." The last one that was probably awake last night; Cal.

He saw the monkey sleeping on the couch, and Brick couldn't help but feel a little mischievous for what he was about to do. Instead of simply tapping him to wake him up, the bull inhaled deeply, and...

"RISE AND SHINE, MONKEY-BOY!"

"AAAGH!"" Cal screamed and jumped like never before; in fact, he literally hit the roof with some of the ceiling caving in. That made enough commotion to attract some more attention, like Striker and Rudy. They came to see Brick rolling on the ground laughing his head off, and Cal trying to pull his head out from the roof.

"What happened?" Striker asked.

"I heard Uncle Cal scream! What happened?" At that point, Tails Doll flew in on the scene, as he looked up at Cal with a shocked look. *"Uncle Cal! How did you get all the way up there?"* the plushie yelled, as he flew up towards Cal, attempting to pull him down as

well.

"...well, now I've seen everything." they could hear Proxy utter, as he, Whisker and Natal approached the scene, looking up at the monkey. "What happened here?"

"...Brick woke Cal up?" Jack replied bluntly, as he looked up at Cal as well.

Tails Doll managed to help Cal pop out of the hole in the ceiling, and fall onto the ground with a THUD! That only served to make Brick laugh louder, until Cal stood up and glared down at him. Then he stopped, though he still had a big grin on his face.

"That wasn't necessary," Cal grumbled.

"But it sure was funny!" Brick chuckled. Then Cal snatched him by the nose ring and yanked him onto his feet, changing his attitude. "OW!"

"Now we're even," Cal responded, as he dusted himself off.

Somehow, Natal couldn't help but let a small snicker out at seeing this scene.

"Um, Cal..." Jack began, as he scratched his neck. "...do you know how Lock got into the clubhouse?"

"Lock's in the Clubhouse?" both Striker and Rudy uttered simultaneously.

"He came last night," Cal replied. "Said something about how he was assigned to watch you guys, and he had run into Callous last night." While the room was filled with shocked looks, Brick only folded his arms.

"I knew it," Brick growled.

"...an' t' think that he survived..." Whisker uttered, as he folded his arms. "He`s either very lucky, or a pretty good fighter."

"So... does this mean that he'll be staying here, too?" Natal inquired,

as she tilted her head.

"Likely," Brick answered.

"But I don't get it," Striker said. "Nothing can fight against Callous' powers except Jill's powers. And if someone got hurt, then only Jill could get rid of it...so..." Striker looked up at everyone. "...if Lock was asked to protect us, do you think it was Jill that healed him, and then asked him to do that?"

Brick stopped to think about that. *...Brownie?*

"But she's training, remember?" Cal reminded. "How could she have met with Lock if she was busy with her training?"

"...it was just a thought," Striker shuffled his feet, embarrassed that he had forgotten about that.

"...wait..." Jack uttered, as he scratched his head. "...there's someone else who could have done that..."

"...who would that be?" Tails Doll inquired, as he looked curiously at Jack.

"Well..." Jack began, as he tapped his forehead whilst humming. "...maybe it could have been... Goddess?"

Cal looked at Jack, baffled at the suggestion. Actually, he was more surprised that Jack thought of that before everyone else, but it was a pretty surprising possibility all the same. "...but why would Goddess...?"

"Well she IS Brownie's ma," Brick replied, rolling his eyes at how obvious that was. "I'm sure it can go without saying."

"...well, whatever the case, we've got one more mouth to feed." Natal noted, as she turned around, walking towards the kitchen. "If you guys are going to Future City again, then we should get breakfast ready quickly."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," Brick said. "Natal, you wantin' to come with us to Future City?" He ended up following her into the kitchen,

leaving Striker, Rudy, Cal, Proxy and Whisker in the room.

Then something occurred to Rudy which made him look around. "...where's Milo?"

"...maybe he's still asleep?" Jack suggested with a shrug.

"I can go check on him!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered down the hall.

"...hm. I'll go and see if he's feeling alright, too." Proxy mused, as he followed the plushie down the hall.

Once Proxy and Tails Doll got to the door and opened it, they'd stumble upon quite an interesting sight. The windows in the room had been covered up in order to bring about total darkness in the room, and the only light that it had was from a few candles; that is if you don't count the light from the hall creeping in from the opened door. There were also burning sticks of incense in a circle around Milo, who sat with crossed legs in the middle of the floor; on top of a strange symbol that he had drawn with some sort of dark blue dust.

"...something wrong?" Milo just barely turned his head, but his eyes remained closed as if he had been in a deep meditation the whole time.

"...um..." Tails Doll uttered, as he looked around the room; he really didn't know what to say to all this.

"...we... were just wondering why you weren't out of your room, yet." Proxy said, trying to hide his surprised tone, though that didn't quite work.

"Oh," Milo turned his head away from them again. "...I was talking to some friends of mine in the spirit world."

"...spirit... world?" Tails Doll uttered, tilting his head further.

"...do you do this kind of thing often, Milo?" Proxy asked, as he watched the pretty elaborate set-up the small lion had gotten together.

"Not often, but I figured it had been awhile and I should try it again," Milo continued not to pay much attention to them. "Only when I started talking to the spirits...they told me that there was an evil disturbance lurking around in their world...I wanted to investigate it."

"...evil disturbance..." Proxy muttered, as he folded his arms. "...have you found out anything, regarding this disturbance?"

"On my own, no, but I was able to get Sage's help through telepathy," Milo said. "...we found out that the one they called the Holy Mother had fallen to that evil, and now her power is his...and he's used it to break through his prison, free into the world...we're still trying to figure out who or what this evil is."

"...I see." Proxy muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...if you happen to meet Sonic... tell him that I told him to be careful." After saying that, he left the room.

"...what did he mean by that?" Tails Doll uttered, as he looked at Milo with a clueless expression.

"...I promise I'll tell you later, Tails Doll," Milo said. "But this investigation will need a lot of my time, which means I won't be able to go to Future City with you guys..."

"...oh..." Tails Doll uttered, as he slouched down in disappointment. *"...I'll make sure to let the others know, then..."* he said, before fluttering out of the room. *"...good luck, Milo!"*

"Thanks," Milo said. He stood from where he sat and closed the door; strangely enough without ever opening his eyes. Once the room was his cave of solitude once more, he sat down. *Sorry Sage, it was Proxy and Tails Doll,* he spoke in his mind.

I see. a female voice in his mind replied. *Did they wonder about anything in particular?*

Proxy wondered if we found out what this evil was, and I told him not much, Milo replied. *...but judging by the way things are going, I may need to help Shadow gain full possession over Proxy soon...many*

bad omens seem to surround the battle between Jill and Callous if what the spirits are saying is true...

...hm. the voice hummed. *And all this talk about the Holy Mother has me worried... I'm thinking of going outside to find some answers later today. I might bring some of the other agents with me; is that a problem?*

It shouldn't be, but I'm sure they'll be curious on what's going on, Milo replied. *Should I come too, and bring Proxy with me?*

That sounds good. the voice replied. *The others are leaving for Future City, right? I'm sure that you and Proxy can leave the place to* Natal *and Calculate.*

Yeah, Milo responded. *...but this evil...I thought at first it was Callous but the spirits say its a "he" and not a "she"...could it be Deity Novagod? That scary vampire that Jill talked about?*

...I wouldn't rule that possibility out. the voice replied, before sighing. *Things certainly are growing more hectic... I do hope that Jill and* Metal Sonic *can pull through.*

I hope so too, Milo said, also sighing.

...well, I shouldn't keep you too occupied; you might miss out on breakfast. the voice said in a more positive tone. *The others over here are just waking up, so I'll talk to you later!*

Okay, Milo nodded, perking up. *Thanks for your help Sage!*

Anytime, Milo! Sage responded, before her voice faded from his mind.

That instant, Milo stood up and went to blow out each of the candles. Once he finished cleaning up whatever he had set up, he opened his door...

...only to meet face to face right with Ani. That made the little lion cub jump, since the husky wolf was tapping her foot with crossed arms, looking suspiciously right at Milo. "Uh...what's wrong?" Milo asked uneasily.

"I don't know what kind of 'spirit magic mumbo-jumbo' you're doing, but if you're not going to Future City because of it, then I want in!" Ani said suddenly, with a big grin on her face.

"Wha?" Milo was shocked at that request.

"Yeah, Tails Doll told me you can talk to ghosts!" Ani added.

"...but...don't you want to go to Future City?" Milo asked. "I mean...are spirits really more interesting than Extreme Gears?"

"Duh!" Ani said.

Milo was a little apprehensive, and he knew that Proxy would be enough protection if something came up; not to mention Sage and the other agents, but he knew he really wasn't going to convince Ani otherwise. "...okay, you can be in it," Milo said. "Later today when everyone's gone to Future City, me and Proxy are going to meet up with Sage and some of the other GUN agents to figure out what this evil disturbance is that the spirits keep telling us about. You can come along..."

"Yes!" Not only did that sound fun, but it could possibly mean she could see her dad again if he were to come with Sage.

"...but keep this a secret okay?" Milo said. "I don't want the others to want to come because it might be...dangerous..."

"My lips are sealed!" Ani chuckled, as she pranced down the hall to get some breakfast.

Milo groaned in disdain, as he regretfully followed behind her. "...what have I done?"

Walking down a flight of stairs at the Chaotix HQ, Sage noticed that not a single soul roamed through the halls. *...hm. Either they're asleep, or they're eating breakfast.* she thought, as she let out a small yawn. *Mrhm... I guess showing everyone our past yesterday took more out of me than I thought...*

Entering into a room, Sage would find Charmy sitting in a seat, quietly thinking to himself. The events he saw last night were truly troublesome, but after years of tragedy his own heart was too hardened to even think about crying over what he saw...

...Somewhere out there, Sonic's, Fang's and Knuckles' killer was still on the loose. That was his main thought. Seeing their past reminded him of his own toil and hardship to solve that one case, and now that he knew who had done it, he was all around anxious and uneasy. Dare he call up Cream and tell her? She deserved to know just as much as he and Tails did, but he feared that her heart would be too faint to take the news.

"...hey." Sage said after a short while, of course having heard everything Charmy had been thinking about. "You're up early."

Charmy's head jerked since he just now noticed Sage was there, and yawned. "I don't sleep well when something's on my mind," he replied.

"I do hope that you haven't been up all night; it's not exactly healthy." Sage said, as she glanced out of the window. "The others are fast asleep, I take it?"

"Some are up already, and are probably eating breakfast," Charmy answered. "I suppose they had the same kind of night I did. I'm not really sure anyway..."

"If it's any of the other agents, I doubt it." Sage said with a mild shrug, as she glanced at Charmy. "...I'll take a few of the agents out with me on a trip later on; just so you won't wonder where we've disappeared to."

"Thanks for the head's up," Charmy said. Then he stood up. "...perhaps I should take a trip myself," he said. "I need to check on Cream and how she's doing...with the way things are now, I don't find it a good idea to leave her alone in that lonely Chao Care there." Then he walked out of the room. "...thank goodness that Boomer and Newt took the time to repair the chopper yesterday."

"'ll say." Sage mused, as she glanced at where Charmy had been

sitting. Shrugging, she took that seat, as she looked out of the window. *...the Holy Mother...* she thought, before closing her eyes. *...who could it refer to?*

Finally coming down the hall Hunter had awoken, and encountered Sage. "Mornin," he muttered, rubbing his eyes drowsily.

"Ah, good morning, Hunter." Sage said, though she didn't open her eyes. "Did you sleep well?"

"As decent as I usually sleep," Hunter responded. "But I probably slept better than the others; Boomer seemed pretty bummed last night so I'm not sure if she even slept at all."

"I'm wondering if it's the same for anyone who wasn't part of the group..." Sage muttered, before she opened her eyes, looking up at the ceiling. "...say, Hunter. I'm thinking of taking a few of the agents on a trip. Feel like joining me?"

Blinking, Hunter tilted his head. "What sort of trip?"

"Nothing too important." Sage said with a chuckle. "I just figured that we shouldn't waste too much time inside today; we'll be knocked straight out of shape." Then, she glanced at the wolf. "So, how about it?"

Hunter shrugged. "Why not? Beats being cooped up inside all day."

Sage smiled at that reply. "Glad to hear it." she chuckled, before humming. "...but who else could I bring along...?"

"Well I'm going to get some breakfast," Hunter said, scratching his head while he walked toward the kitchen.

Boomer was in her room, and unfortunately not asleep in her bed. She was asleep on the ground, however, holding some sort of unfinished weapon in her hand while she was propped up with her back against the workbench. Last night, what she had seen had stressed her out enough that she decided to try making weapons that used the energy of the Chaos Emerald; which was in fact sitting on the workbench. She had done so to calm her nerves and distract her from thinking about it too much, and ended up falling asleep in

the middle of it.

At that point, someone knocked on her door. "...Boomer, are ya awake?" Newt's voice said from behind the door. "Breakfast's ready..."

Boomer didn't wake, since she was in too deep of a slumber to hear the knock and Newt's voice.

Hearing no reply, Newt soon opened the door, seeing that Boomer was fast asleep by the workbench. "...couldn't sleep either, huh..." he murmured, as he cautiously approached the duck, gently nudging her when he got close enough. "Hey, Boomer... wake up..."

"Hm?" This time Boomer woke up, and with a start at first. Then seeing Newt, she relaxed as she wiped her face tiredly. "...what time is it?" she mumbled.

"Early in the morning; everyone else are up already, I think..." Newt replied, as he scratched the back of his neck. "...couldn't sleep either, huh?"

Boomer glanced down at the unfinished gun in her hand, remembering, and she chuckled. "No, I guess not..." Then she grabbed the edge of the workbench, hoisted herself onto her feet, and set the gun on the surface of the workbench. A small sigh escaped her; an expression of how tired she still was.

"...that gun's lookin' pretty snazzy, y'know." Newt noted. "Did ya make it during the night, Boomer?"

"...Huh? Oh, yeah I did," Boomer answered, as it still seemed like she was a bit out of it. "I wanted to figure out how small I can make it without taking away how powerful it could be...but my brain locked up when I became too tired."

"I see..." Newt nodded, before placing a hand on Boomer's shoulder. "Well, you'll be able to finish it without a problem, y'know!"

Boomer smiled up at him. "Thanks."

Looking down at her, Newt couldn't help but smile as well. "...well...

let's go get some breakfast, shall we?"

After a quick peck on Newt's cheek, Boomer turned to the door out into the hall. "Sure," she said, walking out.

Placing a hand on his cheek, Newt couldn't help but blush a bit, before he shook his head. "Ah, wait up, y'know!" he said, as he followed Boomer out of the room.

Boomer passed by Sage. "Good morning Sage," she muttered, when she suddenly realized that was the chair that her Boss usually sat in. "...where's the Captain?" she asked.

"You just missed him; he walked out of the room some time ago." Sage replied, as she was looking out of the window. "He might go to Station Square later today, to pay Cream a visit."

"He's goin' to Station Square?" Newt uttered, as he just caught up with Boomer.

"Yep." Sage nodded. "Meanwhile, me, Hunter and a few others are going out on a trip."

"Is that so?" Boomer muttered. "...well, I still have that gun to work on. If you're intending to try and recruit me, I'll probably stay behind and hold up the fort."

"Oh, no need to worry about that." Sage chuckled. "I was only going to ask some of the agents, anyway..."

"So, where are ya going?" Newt inquired, as he looked at Sage with a raised eyebrow.

"Nowhere in particular." Sage replied pretty quickly.

"...ookay," Boomer said. Then she started to walk toward the kitchen. "I'm getting breakfast."

"Yeah, me too." Newt nodded, as he glanced at Sage. "You comin'?"

"No, I'll be fine. Go on without me." Sage said, as she closed her eyes, leaning back on the chair.

"...alright. See ya later, y'know." Newt replied, before following Boomer towards the kitchen.

Callous was only trying to catch her breath now, but she had a satisfied smirk on her face.

"You really felt that one, didn't you?" Johnny chuckled, as he looked at Callous with that same manner of smirk.

"Oh, I did," Callous answered, as she started playing with the hairs on Johnny's mane.

"Glad to hear it." Johnny chuckled, as he began playing with Callous' hair as well. "I think I've got enough energy for a few more rounds, though. Think you can handle that?"

Callous chuckled herself. "I wouldn't mind."

"Just the words I wanted to hear." Johnny chuckled, as he quickly kissed Callous.

Callous took Johnny and kissed back fiercely. As she did that, Johnny wrapped his arms around Callous and pulled her towards him, forcing their bodies to press against each other, whilst he deepened the kiss. In her existence, Callous had never had such a wild time such as this, and yet she could only imagine how Jill was handling it.

She could burst out laughing.

And Jill still wasn't happy with it. Even if her stomach was getting upset again, she was gritting her teeth. *This is really starting to get old Callous,* she thought.

"Is she STILL at it?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at Jill, whilst leaning against a tree. *"...well, I do have to give her credit on one point; she has stamina to last."*

"Maybe it's the *soul-sucking* that has something to do with it," Jill growled.

"Perhaps..." Metal muttered, before he shuddered. *"...then again, she lasted fairly long while she was with Cal, so- wait, why am I getting into that kind of subject matter?"* Shaking his head, he rubbed his temples. *"Hrm... should we go and get Silver, so we can begin the training?"*

That crack on Cal made Jill wonder, and then she discarded it when she figured that, like anything else that had to do with Callous, she didn't want to know.

"Yeah, we should," she said. This time she toughened out the nausea to be able to walk toward the direction of the cave.

Watching Jill tough it out like that, Metal closed his eyes. *...I need to keep her alive. If not... then everything will have been in vain...* he thought, before following Jill.

Jill saw that Silver was sprawled out on the cave floor, snoring. "Sleeping like a baby..." she muttered.

Then something totally outside of her character occurred, as a small, mischievous smirk crept across her face. So she knelt down, and plucked Silver's ear up.

"OW!" Silver was awake immediately, and whining at the pain of his pulled ear. "Did I do something wrong? OW! Hey!"

Jill's eyes flashed in realization at what she was doing and she let Silver go. *...what in the world was I doing?* she thought.

...that is... odd . Metal thought, before shaking his head. " *...good morning, Silver. Sleep well?"* he asked.

"Well, yeah I guess," Silver said. "But...why did you pull my ear Jill?"

Jill's mind was blank for answers. "...I guess I just picked out an inappropriate way to wake you up," she said, shifting her feet uncomfortably. Then she cleared her throat to go on another subject. "We'll need your help for training today Silver."

"Huh? Oh yeah, aerial combat," Silver said.

"I think I have a pretty logical set-up for training today." Metal said, as he turned around. *"If both of you would follow me, please?"* he added, before walking out of the cave.

Silver went ahead first, and Jill hesitated. *...is it really happening?* she thought. This morning she had said something to Metal about how her's and Callous' personalities were mixing up. Had that been Callous' personality that pushed through her just now?

Just so they wouldn't worry, Jill hurried and followed the two close behind.

Once Metal stopped, he turned to face Silver and Jill. *"Alright, I'll make this simple. Jill, you may turn into your Holy form."* he said, as he slowly floated up into the air, keeping his eyes on Jill.

While Silver used his telekinesis to suspend himself into the air as well, that cocoon of white light transformed Jill into her Holy Form and she joined them in the air.

"Actually, Silver, I want you on the ground for this session." Metal said, as he glanced at the hedgehog. *"I'll need you to pick up and throw things; your specialty, right?"*

"Uh...okay," and Silver placed himself back down on the ground.

"Alright, here's how it's going to go down; we'll be practicing maneuverability and hitting targets." Metal said, as he looked back at Jill. *"What you'll be doing is simple; try to hit me as many times as you can, be it with close-range or long-range attacks."* Then, he looked down at Silver. *"At the same time, Silver will pick up and hurl objects at you, which you need to avoid as best you can.* " Then, he looked back up at Jill. *"Any questions?"*

Jill and Silver shared a look, and then both shrugged. *"Sounds simple enough,"* Jill said.

"I'm glad that we have an understanding." Metal chuckled, as he formed a shield from liquid metal, which he held in front of him. *"This will be your target; though it's not going to be stationary. Let's begin!"* Then, he began moving around in the air, following a wavy pattern of sorts.

Jill took off after Metal, summoning up her bow and aimed a few arrows for that shield.

In the meantime, Silver collected together a few things to prepare to throw them at Jill.

Sure enough, Metal began evading the arrows, only letting one of them bounce off the shield. *That's one hit...* he thought, focusing on keeping himself in motion.

Silver now had enough things to throw, and began to hurl things like rocks and branches as a beginning. Jill moved around them easily, while continuing to launch more arrows at the shield that Metal held. Silver began to upgrade to bigger rocks and big logs, but even those were too easy for Jill to avoid.

Then a snarky comment came out of Jill before she could stop herself. *"C'mon Silver. A toddler could hurl things with deadlier velocity."*

"Why you..." That made Silver mad enough to bring forth boulders of alarming size, and he threw one at Jill.

Her bow instantly changed to her sword, and with a quick flip, she sliced the boulder itself in half, chucking one half right at Metal.

After avoiding several of the arrows, only letting a few hit the shield, Metal quickly reacted to the incoming boulder, veering to the side to avoid the incoming projectile. *"...is that the best you got?"* he suddenly commented, tilting his head. *"Come on; stop trying to hit me, and hit me!"*

Jill only laughed. *"Oh, such an overused line."* Then when her bow was back in her hands, she pulled back a much more powerful arrow, that actually had some impact against her when she shot it at

Metal.

With it being only one arrow, however, Metal easily avoided it. *"Well, it bears repeating; especially with that kind of aim!"* he called back.

"Well if it's so easy for you to insult me, why not just face me for real?" Jill challenged.

"Itching for a real fight, are we?" Metal noted, as he shook his head . *"Get real. We both know that I have the advantage; it'd be over in seconds!"*

"Then prove it, " Jill egged on with a smirk, replacing her bow with her sword.

"Very well; you asked for it." Metal chuckled, as the shield morphed into a bladed arm, which was immediately coated by Unity. *"But don't come crying when I beat you!"* Then, he suddenly blasted towards Jill, swiping the blade at her.

Jill blocked with her own sword, with sparks flying at the encounter of their blades. To this, she laughed. *"Here come the fireworks!"*

"Oh, what I've got in store packs more punch than some measly fireworks!" Metal laughed, as his other arm turned into a blade as well, as he coated that one with Unity as well, before slashing at Jill.

"...what are they doing?" Silver wondered in shock.

Jill jumped backward, laughing only more. *"Missed!"* Then she tried to come at Metal from behind with a couple swings.

However, as she swung, Metal instantly vanished, before reappearing behind Jill. *"Too slow!"* he laughed, aiming slashes at Jill's back.

Jill managed to spin around and block both slashes with only one sword. *"Ooooo, nice magic trick, Copperfield!"* she mocked, charging again with her sword.

However, Metal easily blocked the strike with only one of his blades.

"Come on, I'm not even winded! Are you even trying to hit me?" he quipped, as he aimed a kick directly at her ribs.

Jill moved aside from the kick. *"Nope. I'm not trying. In fact, I'm all out screwing around with you!"* she exclaimed. Abandoning her sword, she coated her hands with Purity energy and began throwing many punches at the Metallix.

Thinking quickly, Metal used his blades to block every single punch Jill threw his way. *"Well, that won't get you anywhere!"* he said, just as his blades morphed back into regular arms, though Unity still covered them. *"If you can't even land a solid hit on me, then you're the one who's screwed!"* he said, as he began throwing punches at Jill.

Jill tried blocking the punches like a regular martial artist, but one punch pushed through her defenses, knocking her back a little ways. It hurt just like before; more than she could imagine.

Silver noticed that the winds began to pick up quickly, and some dark clouds were beginning to roll in above in the sky. "...uh-oh," he murmured.

More Purity oozed out of her hands, and Jill looked back at Metal irritatingly. Then she propelled herself forward very quickly, aiming to try and punch Metal again.

Quickly raising his arms, Metal blocked the punch from reaching him. *"Aaw, did I hurt you?"* he said in a mock-sympathetic tone, before his legs were coated in Unity. *"That's just too bad!"* he laughed, before aiming a fierce kick at Jill.

Jill couldn't stop the kick, knocking her back again. But it certainly increased her anger...

A storm had brewed overhead, and Silver heard thunder rumbling. He even felt a single drop on his nose, and it gradually grew to a large downpour, where he struggled to watch the two battling up above with all the rain hitting his face.

The rain didn't bother Jill one bit, no matter how soaked she was in

a manner of minutes. In both her palms she conjured up a large ball of Purity that she shot at Metal.

"Hm!" Reacting quickly, Metal warped away before the ball of Purity could reach him, reappearing below Jill. *"You really have lousy aim!"* he taunted, as he conjured up a ball of Unity, which he hurled right up at Jill.

She quickly shot to dispel the Unity with Purity, but it had done so too close to her, and it blew her back again. She growled. *"Alright Toaster, you're really getting on my-"* Finally she came to her senses, and realized what was going on. She had let the other personality take over her, and she was so absorbed in the battle that she didn't try to fight it. She even called Metal a "Toaster!"

But why was Metal acting like that as well?

"...Metal, what are we doing?" she uttered.

While he had been prepared to fire off another ball of Unity, once Jill uttered those words, Metal stopped, as he realized what had happened, quickly dispelling the Unity around him. *"...I..."* he uttered, before holding his head. *"...I... don't know..."*

Jill was about to speak again, but as soon as she heard another crackle in the sky, she was stopped. Metal witnessed a lightning rod shoot down from the sky, and literally strike her from behind. Uttering a cry of unruly pain, Jill was shortly silenced and was seen falling toward the Earth.

"Jill!" Silver had seen it too and ran frantically for the direction she was falling toward.

If they could widen, Metal's eyes definitely would have, as he could only watch Jill plummet towards the earth. Images began flashing through his mind, recalling an experience similar to this; only he could swear that the roles had been reversed. *"JILL!"* In that very instant, Metal warped directly underneath Jill, catching her before she would hit the ground.

Silver braked to a stop when he saw Metal appear from nowhere

and catch her to his relief, but unfortunately Jill was unconscious. Then Silver realized that Metal was made from well, metal. He could suffer the same fate.

If only he knew that it had already happened before.

"We gotta get out of the storm!" Silver shouted.

Looking down at Silver, Metal nodded. *"I'll take her to the caves!"* he said, before he and Jill vanished from where they stood.

Only a few seconds later, both of them reappeared by the mouth of the cave, which Metal quickly entered. *"Come on, Jill... please be safe..."* he muttered, as he placed Jill against the wall.

"Hey! Don't forget about me!" Soon enough, Silver came running into the cave, and he stopped a minute to catch his breath. In the meantime, Jill faded away to her normal self, while Silver took a look at her. "Is she alright?" he asked Metal.

"...I'm not sure." Metal uttered, as he placed his fingers against Jill's neck, trying to feel her pulse. Luckily there was a pulse, but it felt slow and faint.

"Geez...how did that storm come so quickly?" Silver wondered, looking out at the rain pouring down outside.

"...you're asking the wrong person, there." Metal muttered, as he removed his hand from Jill. *"...tsch... I've never been in this kind of situation before. How am I supposed to wake someone up after they've been struck by lightning...?"*

"...I have no clue," Silver said. "But as long as she's still alive she might wake up on her own..." yet he turned away uneasily. "...I hope," he murmured to himself.

"...I am not going to take that chance." Metal muttered, as he looked at Jill, placing a hand against her cheek. *"I need to make sure that she does wake up, no matter what..."*

Silver didn't know what else to say, so all he did was look out at the storm.

As Metal kept looking at Jill, he eventually closed his eyes, without moving his hand away. *...Jill... please, wake up...* he thought.

Chapter 70

CHAPTER – SEVENTY

Milo stood outside the treehouse, looking off in the distance. Sure, it was nice and sunny here, and the clear blue could be seen, but something was still bugging him; those clouds far, far away. They looked like storm clouds, and he could even see it raining there if he squinted, but while one would expect the clouds to gradually move along...they remained stuck there.

There was something...unnatural to that storm.

"...strange..." he murmured, as he ventured back inside.

As Milo went inside, he'd eventually see Proxy, who was looking out of a window, his eyes on the clouds as well.

"Don't you notice something weird about those clouds?" Milo asked him.

"...I do." Proxy muttered, without looking at Milo. "For whatever reason... I'm worried."

"...me too," Milo admitted. Then an arm grabbed him and yanked him, "Oi!"

"So, when do we leave?" Ani asked, having been the one to grab Milo.

Proxy blinked at that, as he glanced at Milo and Ani. "...leave where?" he uttered, as he raised an eyebrow.

Milo pushed Ani away, and straightened himself out. "Sorry I forgot to tell you Proxy," he said. "...but I wanted to meet up with Sage to do some more investigating. I was going to take Ani with me...and you too."

"...is that so...?" Proxy mused, as he glanced outside again. "...well,

it couldn't hurt, I suppose."

"Going somewhere?" Hearing that voice, Proxy glanced down the hall, where Lock stood, a fully-repaired rifle hanging from his back. "You wouldn't mind if I accompanied you?"

"I guess it's okay," Milo muttered, though he wondered if it was really a good idea to bring a bounty hunter to meet former GUN agents that people might be looking for...after all, he expected Lock to have gone with the rest of the group to Future City.

"Cool!" obviously Ani thought it would be pretty cool to have Lock with them; thinking the complete opposite of what Milo was thinking.

"Well, let's not waste any time." Lock said, as he approached the three of them. "By the way... remind me to thank Brick, for letting me borrow his workshop."

"...we'll make sure to keep it in mind." Proxy said, as he glanced down at Milo. "Where did she say she wanted to meet us?"

"Somewhere along the Emerald Coast," Milo answered. "It's closed off to the public, so it's a good, isolated place where we can go."

"...the Emerald Coast, huh?" Proxy mused, before nodding. "I see. I'll go and get the emerald, then." With that, he turned and went down the hall.

"...friend of yours that you're meeting with?" Lock inquired, as he glanced down at Milo.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't know if you'll know them or not, but they're going to help us out with something." Milo had pulled something out, and put it around his neck. It was some sort of necklace made with beads and feathers.

"...what's that?" Ani asked.

"It's a special charm," Milo replied. "My people believed this kind of charm could ensure safety...It's kinda like a safety blankie to me."

"...okay..." Ani muttered, rolling her eyes.

"...keep onto it, if that's the case." Lock muttered, as he looked out of the window. "...huh. What's with those clouds...?"

"Got it." they heard Proxy said, as he approached Milo, Ani and Lock, the cyan Emerald in his right hand. "Everyone ready?"

"We're ready," Milo said.

"Then let's not waste any time. Chaos Control!" In that instant, all four of them disappeared.

"Kekekeke... I can't see anyone here..." Currently, four characters stood by the water's edge on a beach; the closed-off Emerald Coast. These four were Sage, Hunter, Ripper and Miser. "...are you sure that they were gonna be here, Sage? Kekeke..."

"Give it a moment, Ripper..." Sage mused, as she looked around her.

A flash occurred near them, and it placed the other four; Milo, Ani, Proxy and Lock on the shores of the coast. Milo immediately spotted Sage and her group from afar. "There they are," he murmured to himself as he approached them.

Ani of course, spotted Hunter. "Dad!" She exclaimed, charging and successfully tackling him down onto the sand, which certainly surprised the wolf.

"Ani?" he uttered.

"...well, that was a crowd I certainly didn't expect." Sage mused. "Proxy, yes. Ani and..." At that point, she noticed Lock. "...my, my... what friends have you made while you were gone?"

"...those four..." Lock uttered. "...they're the renegades from GUN." Then, he quickly pulled out his rifle, pointing it at Sage. "There's a hefty sum on your heads, renegades."

Seeing Lock pull out his gun, Proxy quickly got in his way. "Lower the gun; they're with us."

"...is that so?" Lock uttered, still not moving his rifle from where he aimed it.

"...I knew this would happen," murmured Milo nervously as he walked up to Lock. "Lock, they're friendly. I promise they're not bad at all and they won't hurt us."

"...really?" Lock uttered dryly, as he glanced at the agents. "I have my doubts."

"Doubt it if you will, but they won't try to harm us at all." Proxy said, as he kept glaring at Lock. "If you believe otherwise... you're free to pull the trigger."

"...with you in front of it?" Lock scoffed, before lowering the gun. "Don't be a fool; you're no target." Then, he chuckled. "Very well... but the moment they grow hostile, I'm taking them down."

"Alright, we can move on, now!" Sage called to the group. "Let's get things started, already!"

"...oh, yes..." Miser uttered, as she looked at Sage. "...you didn't tell us what this trip was for, yet."

"Something bad is going on," Milo began for them. "Overnight I spoke to the spirits, and they tell of unsettling things. One of this Holy Mother falling to a great evil, and this evil having broken free and run amok in our world."

"...okay, I'm lost," Ani said.

"Me too," Hunter added.

While Miser and Lock appeared clueless, and Sage and Proxy simply knowing of this already, Ripper looked at Milo curiously. "...Holy... Mother...?" he uttered, slowly walking towards Milo. "Great... evil? Kekekeke... what do you think it could be?"

"We don't know, yet." Sage said, as she closed her eyes. "But we hope to find out more on this trip. Me and Milo have already been discussing this for a bit, and we needed to get some more hands-on information."

"...you two were talking?" Lock uttered, as he folded his arms. "How did you do that?"

"The same way I just found out that your favorite color is dark-blue, Lock the Sniper." Sage said with a mild chuckle, looking at the bounty hunter with a clever gaze.

"Huh, I didn't know that," Ani murmured with interest at that little tid-bit.

"There's more," Milo said. "They say that the spirits are slowly losing their power. They said, "Places that were once restless with the spirits are now empty..." but I couldn't interpret that one very well..." The little lion started pacing back and forth. "...personally, I thought that they were speaking of Callous when they spoke of this evil...but there are some things that are proving this evil to be someone else..."

"...someone worse than Callous?" Hunter uttered.

Hearing Hunter suggest that, Ripper let out a shocked gasp, something that surprised Miser. "Ripper, what's wrong?" she uttered.

"...ke... kekekeke..." Ripper laughed nervously. "It... it can't be..." As he spoke, he held his head. "That... Master, that they talked about..."

"...master?" Lock inquired, as he looked at Ripper. "What master? And who are 'they'?"

"Tell us Ripper!" Ani pestered.

"...kekeke... they..." Ripper began, as he glanced towards one of his blade-arms; namely, the one he had cut off to paralyze Slashers long enough for Jill to purify him. "...they've been in me... ever since those days... kekekeke... but Corruption made them a lot stronger..."

"...Corruption..." Miser uttered, as she recalled the fight between Ripper and Callous within the volcano. "...you mean that because of Callous..."

"Kekeke... yes... they took over me..." Ripper admitted, as he looked down at the ground.

"But just who are 'they', anyway?" Lock asked again.

"...my blades." Ripper finally said, closing his eyes.

"So that's why Sage sensed more than one brainwave pattern," Hunter said, rubbing his chin.

"And this Master they spoke of," Milo said, walking up to Ripper. "Do you know who they might have been talking about?"

"...I'm not sure..." Ripper uttered, as he rubbed the back of his head. "...though... when they met Callous... they called her 'princess'... kekeke..."

"Princess?" Proxy uttered, as he tilted his head. "Hm... if they called Callous a princess..."

"...then I have a sneaking suspicion that we might be dealing with Deity Novagod, himself." Sage noted.

"Whoa, time out!" Ani uttered, making a "T" with her hands. "Are you talking about that freaky vampire that went after Jill long ago?"

"The same," Milo answered.

"...then Deity Novagod is not imprisoned in that black emerald anymore?" Ani assumed in shock, putting the pieces together. "He's out free?"

"Apparently, that seems to be the case..." Miser muttered.

"...kekekeke... but when they had control over me..." Ripper hummed. "...they spoke of the master being freed... as if he was still trapped..."

"And you were only gone for two days, about a week ago." Sage said, as she connected the facts mentally. "Which means that at least during the period when Jill's training began, Novagod was still trapped."

"...excuse me, but..." Lock uttered, as he looked at Sage. "...what in the world are you people talking about?"

"It's a long story; believe me." Proxy said, as he glanced towards Sage.

"...so what?" Hunter asked. "Are we looking for a fight with this Deity?"

"Certainly not," Milo said. "If we can't hardly fight against Callous, there's no way we could go against someone who might be worse than her." Milo started pacing back and forth again. "No, I want to find out why the spirits are so shaken up and afraid of the things to come...and who this 'Holy Mother' might be."

"Well, let's not waste any time." Proxy said, as he rubbed his hands together. "Where do we start?"

"Well, I think that is for our little medium to decide." Sage said, as she glanced down at Milo. "Where would the best spot for gathering information from beyond the grave be?"

"...well for some reason, it's all pointing in the direction of long lost Angel Island," Milo said. "But I'm not quite sure how to find that place...the Professor said it went missing a short 30 years ago; give or take."

"...you know, for some reason, I keep thinking of good old Metal Sonic, when I hear about Angel Island." Sage hummed, as she scratched her beak.

"Metal Sonic?" Lock uttered with some interest. "I heard that he went missing some time ago. Does that have anything to do with Novagod?"

"Possibly, if my intuition is on the money." Sage noted, as she tapped her head. "But since he's busy, we'll need to improvise..."

"...what about Cal?" Proxy suggested.

"Maybe, but he's with the others at Future City by now probably," Milo said. "Sage and her friends can't go around in public..."

"Then Proxy can use Chaos Control to pop by and grab him when no one's looking, like a ninja!" Ani laughed.

"...but is that a good idea either?" Milo asked. "People know that Shadow's dead, and since Proxy looks so much like Shadow...it might scare some people. You said that Future City's a big place with lots of people, and there might not be a way to get Cal to a quiet, hidden place to do that."

"Well...Proxy's an android right?" Ani continued. "Can't he, like...contact Cal or something? The monkey IS part cyborg after all."

"It is possible..." Proxy mused, as he scratched the back of his neck. "...but to be honest, I've never tried anything like that before. Ever since I escaped from Westopolis, the only thing that has distinguished me from the actual Shadow is my ability to use Corruption... and the fact that I lost my head once, and lived to tell the tale."

"Well, it couldn't hurt to try, at least." Sage noted, as she gave Proxy a nod. "Try thinking about communicating with Calculate, and see if it works."

"...I'll try." Proxy uttered, as he closed his eyes, focusing on one thing only; communicating with the cybernetic simian.

Somewhere across the earth, a ringing went off in a certain monkey's head.

Proxy, after awhile, finally heard a voice on the other line. *What in the world? Who is this, and how did you figure out how to contact me?*

...huh. Never thought that it'd actually work. Proxy replied, as his eyes opened. *No need for alarm, Cal; it's me, Proxy.*

Fascinating, the other voice, Cal, spoke. *I'm surprised you tried to contact me...what is it?*

I need to ask you a question. Proxy began, as he folded his arms. *Before* Metal Sonic *told you to stay with us at the* Clubhouse *... did he ever tell you to stake out* Angel Island *?*

...he didn't tell me to stake it out, he told me to find it, Cal answered, *and I did...why do you ask?*

...just curious, is all. Proxy responded. *Can you transmit the exact coordinates you found it in?*

...I can, but I'm still wondering why you want to know about Angel Island, Cal replied. *What are you up to anyway?*

I need to add some facts together. Proxy replied. *I'll give you a more detailed explanation afterward, but for now, I need those coordinates.*

Well, alright...There, I sent them now, so you should receive them shortly, Cal said. *Just be smart about whatever you're doing...*

I will. Proxy nodded. *Thanks, Cal.* After that, he shook his head, looking at the group.

"...so, how did it go?" Miser uttered.

"...perfect. Give me a few, and I'll write the coordinates in the sand." Proxy replied, as he crouched down by the sand, writing several different numbers in the sand with his finger.

While watching Proxy write them down, Ani just looked at them blankly. "...but I can't read numbers like that!" she complained, throwing her arms in the air.

"Don't worry, hun; we have a psychic on the case." Sage chuckled, as she looked down at the numbers. "Enough mental capacity for the whole family!"

After a while, Proxy finished writing, as he stepped away, allowing Sage to read and memorize the numbers. "With any luck, that's where Angel Island should be." Proxy said.

"So where is it?" Ani asked immediately.

"Just be patient," Hunter chuckled.

"...well, it's in the air; way up high." Sage said, as she glanced out towards the sea. "At the moment, the island is hovering far away from solid land, with nothing but the ocean underneath it."

"But you can take us there, Sage... right?" Miser supposed.

"Of course I can!" Sage laughed, as she patted Miser's back. "I've been doing this kind of thing long before I ever met the other agents, and you think I won't last?" Then, she looked at the others. "Well? Who wants a ride on the Psychic Express?"

"Ooo! Ooo! I do!" Ani exclaimed, jumping up and down with her hand in the air. Hunter laughed and ruffled her hair in amusement.

Milo was a little nervous, because he was afraid of heights, but part of him felt like he trusted Sage enough to know she wouldn't drop him. Still, he may close his eyes for the portion of the trip. "Well, go ahead and take us there Sage," he muttered.

"If you insist." Sage chuckled, as she closed her eyes, forcibly pulling everyone closer to her, before she began flapping her wings. "Angel Island, here we come!" she said, as she took off, carrying the others after her.

"Woo!" Ani cheered, seeing this as a fun thing rather than Milo who was uneasy about it.

"Wow, Future City seems to be abuzz today," Brick said. The crowd could have been twice, no, three times as big as it was yesterday, and he had almost lost some of the gang in the massive sea of people that had come.

"I wonder why it's so busy today!" Striker said.

"Haven't you all heard?" Some random person happened to stop by them to answer their question. "Today is the grand opening of the newly built Racing Dome in the center of the city! All Extreme Gear racers are going down there to sign up for the race they're holding in order to celebrate it's opening."

Brick blinked. "...and how come we didn't find any of this out yesterday?" Before he could get his question answered, that person took off. "Hey, wait!"

"Ooh, there's gonna be a big race today!" Tails Doll cheered, as he fluttered on top of Brick's head. *"Who do you think is going to win?"*

"Yaar, 'tis got t' be one o' ye guys, o' course!" they heard Whisker laugh, as he approached Brick, Striker and Tails Doll, with Jack and Rudy sitting on his shoulders.

"I can't wait! We got to join the race, Brick!" Jack laughed, as he held his Extreme Gear ready.

"Yeah, we'll totally dominate!" Rudy added, holding his own gear up.

"Well, first we got to wait for Natal to have her gear registered," Brick said. "She and Cal should be back sometime soon, and once they get back we all can go check out that Racing Dome..."

"Just hang on a sec!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered above Brick's head, looking around, until he could see an unmistakeable shade of green, headed towards them. "They're coming!"

Yes, walking towards the group was Natal and Cal, the former holding an Extreme Gear over her shoulder.

"There you are," Brick said, once they made it to them.

"So Natal, what did you name your gear?" Striker asked excitedly.

"Eh, I couldn't think of a particularily fancy name for it..." Natal began, as she scratched the back of her neck. "In fact, it's... actually pretty silly."

"Silly names can be cool, too!" Tails Doll chimed in.

"So, what did you name it?" Jack pressed, as Natal looked away with a bashful smile.

"...erm... Sly Spy?" she eventually managed to utter.

Brick couldn't stop himself from laughing. "Well, it's not a bad name for a Speed type," he said. "Now that you got your gear registered, we should check out that Racing Dome that everyone seems to be talking about."

"Yeah, people seem to be pretty pumped over this new race down there." Natal said, as she pointed a thumb behind her. "There were a lot of people who were going to register their Gears before the race."

"Then it's gonna be crowded!" Tails Doll noted.

"Maybe we ortin' ta hurry; otherwise, we might be too late t' enter th' race!" Whisker noted, as he glanced down at Brick.

"We could probably get directions to get there," Brick said. "C'mon."

Eventually the group came to an area that was thankfully thinned in terms of crowds, to a point where groups of people were casually hanging out together, though it didn't likely seem any place near this Racing Dome everyone talked about. There was one particular group that turned out to be made up of six; all of them male bull frogs for some reason of many different ages. At first they were incredibly absorbed in their own conversation, but one of them happened to glance in their direction, after which they pointed with widened eyes. When all six bullfrogs looked at them, they gained bright, cheery looks.

"SIS!"

All of them all at once charged like a stampede, and grabbed one particular someone in their group in a giant group hug; Natal.

"Wow, I can't believe you're here Natal!" the youngest one of the frogs said, who couldn't be much farther than 4 years old.

"Yeah, we all thought you'd be too busy with work!" said the one frog who was giant; even bigger than Whisker, and had a deep monotone voice.

Brick and the others were simply baffled at what was going on.

"Everyone!" Natal laughed, as she tried returning the hug to all six as best she could. "This is unexpected!" she added. "...um... getting crushed, guys..."

"...that's a lot of frogs." Tails Doll uttered in a flat tone.

The six frogs let go of Natal, all of them laughing. "Oh, that's nothing," one of them answered Tails Doll with a wise guy tone; though sounded quite childish at it like he was 11. "We've still got our four other sisters back home."

"...so thar`s e'en more frogs in other places?" Whisker uttered, as he tilted his head.

"Well... big family." Natal chuckled, as she scratched her neck. "Well... these are my brothers." she said, motioning towards the frogs. "And these are my friends." she added, motioning towards the group.

"Nice to meet you guys!" Jack said with a smile. "I'm Jack the Lion!"

"Call me Tails Doll!" Tails Doll chimed in, as he fluttered around Brick's head.

"An' I be Captain Whisker!" Whisker said, laughing loudly as he placed his hands on his hips.

"Brick Cainfield," Brick said with a nod.

"Striker!" The bear exclaimed. Then he gestured to the kangaroo on Whisker's other shoulder, "and his name is Rudy!"

"Hiya!" Rudy greeted.

"Cal," the monkey muttered quietly. Again, he wasn't the social type.

"Well, I'm Speedy," said the wise-guy frog that had answered Tails Doll earlier. "The big guy there's Tiny; go figure."

"Hi," boomed the big frog that was bigger than Whisker.

"Our smallest is Junior," Speedy continued, gesturing to the 4 year old that waved. "And then we got the more middle-aged ones."

"My name's River," introduced a very shy looking frog who was 14.

"I'm Fudge!" blurted an excited and obnoxious 9 year old.

"And I'm Lotus," Introduced a calm 16 year old. Then Lotus chuckled, "And Speedy, you're younger than me. You should talk about middle aged."

"This be a surprise..." Whisker noted, as he folded his arms. "I never imagined that Natal`d be havin' a family this huge."

"Well, they're family, so it's all good, isn't it?" Natal giggled, as she glanced at Lotus. "I do have to ask, though... are you all here for the race?"

"Actually, we're here to promote our musical talent and here we got the perfect publicity!" Speedy answered instead with a grin.

Lotus rolled his eyes. "It was all Speedy's idea..."

"Yeah, we've been trying to publicize our music group since before Natal tried getting into GUN!" added Fudge excitedly.

"...music group?" chuckled Brick amusingly, looking at Natal. This sounded too good to be true.

"Still doing that, huh..." Natal chuckled. "Well, good to hear that you're still trying."

"Ooh, what's the name of the band?" Jack chimed in, as he looked at Natal.

"Unless they've changed it, they used our family name for the group name..." Natal mused. "...do you guys still go by The Kodokas?"

"Close!" Speedy said with a dramatic point. "We've changed it since then. Now we're going by the Kodoka Brothers!"

"What's your repertoire, anyway?" Brick asked.

"We sing a cappella!" they all shouted at the same time, making Brick's ears ring with the sheer volume.

"And what voices you have," he moaned in agony at his hearing, rubbing a finger in his ear.

"...I'm still surprised that Natal had such a big family, and she never said anything about you," Cal murmured.

"What can we say?" Speedy said with a shrug. "We Kodokas breed like rabbits!"

That comment turned Cal extremely red, and he cleared his throat while adjusting his glasses. "Um...interesting..." and that made all six of those frogs laugh.

That comment also made Natal break out into giggles, as she readjusted her own glasses.

"So, where are you guys going to sing? " Tails Doll inquired, as he tilted his head. " *Not all of us are going to race, so we might catch a glimpse of you in the act!"*

"We're waiting until the race starts, so that we can find the place with a big enough crowd to perform," Lotus said.

"Oh yeah. You wouldn't happen to know where the new Racing Dome is, would you?" Brick asked, since he just remembered.

"Sure, it's just down the street from here," Lotus answered. "I'm guessing that most of the racers are still registering their gears because there's not many gathered over at the Dome just yet. Should be plenty of open spots for you guys to take."

"Hey, are you going to race Natal?" asked Junior excitedly, tugging on Natal's coat.

"You know it." Natal chuckled, as she rubbed Junior's head. "I'll even try to win."

"Well, you'll need a whole heap of skill for that, sister!" they heard

someone laugh, which made the group glance in the direction that the voice came from; as it turned out, it was Punk, as he and Gale walked towards them, their Extreme Gears hanging on their backs. "Yo! Ready to race?"

"Hiya, Punk and Gale!" Jack said with a smile, as he waved at the two hawks.

"Nice! You guys know the Babylon Rogues?" Fudge uttered eagerly.

"Yeah, we met 'em yesterday," Brick said. Then he grinned at Punk, "of course we're ready to race. You guys already signed up?"

"Are you kidding? We were the first," Gale chuckled.

"Did you seriously expect anything different?" Punk chuckled, as he glanced at Natal. "Heh... didn't actually expect that the Natal of Team Alpha would pop up. You guys are just full of surprises, aren't ya?"

"I guess we are!" Jack laughed.

At that point, Punk noticed something about the group that was off. "...where's the wolf-chick?" he inquired.

"Ani? She couldn't come today." Tails Doll said with a shrug.

"Bummer, I guess she'll miss out then," Gale said, folding her arms. But secretly she was relieved. She didn't want to race Ani again for fear that she might actually win fair and square this time.

"Well we better go find a place to set up," Lotus said, turning to Natal. "It was great seeing you again sis."

"DITTO!" the other frogs exclaimed simultaneously, ringing Brick's ears again.

"It was nice to see you guys, too." Natal said with a smile. "When you get home, tell the sisters that I said hi!"

"We sure will!" Fudge answered, just as he and Junior were hoisted up to sit on Tiny's big, broad shoulders. Then he pointed ahead.

"Onward!"

"Bye Natal," Tiny rumbled with his low, bass-like voice, as the group walked away.

"...well they were an interesting group," Brick muttered.

"I'll take that as a compliment." Natal chuckled, as she glanced at Brick. "Let's go and get ourselves ready for the race."

"Think you'll be able to win?" Punk said with a chuckle, as he raised an eyebrow.

"We'll try!" Jack said cheerfully, as he held up his Extreme Gear.

"You should be ready to try a lot; remember, you're talking to the champ for five years straight, here!" Punk laughed, as he began walking ahead of the group. "See you on the course!"

"C'mon, let's hurry and sign up before those spots are taken!" Striker said, taking off running and sweeping right past Punk and Gale.

"Hey! Wait for us Striker!" Rudy said, hopping off Whisker's shoulder and chasing after Striker.

Cal sighed, and ran after them. "Guys, stay with the group!"

"Ooh, it's a race already!" Tails Doll cheered, as he fluttered after Striker, Rudy and Cal.

"Hey, wait up!" Jack laughed, as he ran after the four as well.

Blinking, Natal glanced at Brick and Whisker. "...I guess we should follow them?" she suggested.

"Mind as well," Brick said, shrugging.

"Let's go before we lose them, then." Natal nodded, as she ran after the group.

"Aye, wait fer me!" Whisker called, as he ran after Natal as well.

Brick didn't start off after them right away. A breeze swept by him, and he turned to face the draft. While thinking how refreshing it was, it somehow got him thinking about Jill again. He wished she could be here having fun with them, rather than training. "I sure miss you Brownie," he murmured to himself. "I hope Metal is taking care of you." Then he ran off after the others.

"I think that storm is getting worse..." Silver said, without taking his eyes off from outside.

"...mhm." Metal uttered with a mildly disinterested tone, as he was still looking at Jill. *...Jill... please, at least show me that you're still...*

Silver was worried about Jill as well, but he probably wasn't as worried as Metal might have been. It was just that this storm felt weird, not normal. Then all of a sudden, Silver's ear caught a murmur, and he turned quickly to Jill, who's hand started twitching.

Metal noticed that as well, as he quickly noticed Jill's hand twitching. *"...Jill? You're alright?"* he uttered.

Jill thought she heard a voice from the sea of darkness that her mind was rising out of, and she tried to open her eyes. The darkness faded to a blurry image, and after a few blinks, she saw Metal. "...I think so," she managed to answer, "but what hit me?"

Hearing Jill's voice, Metal closed his eyes, sighing in relief. " *You were hit by a lightning bolt, Jill."* he replied, before he opened his eyes. *"You had me worried."*

"Really?" Jill's head rested back against the wall. "Geez...all these things keep happening just to interrupt training..."

"Can you get up?" Silver asked.

Jill tried; but she strangely found that all she could really move were her fingers. "Huh?" She managed to move her head too, but no matter how hard she tried, she could scarcely move. "...that's weird, I can't move," she said. "I can't feel anything either."

"...uh oh..." Metal uttered, as he slowly thought of what this could mean. *"...don't tell me that the lightning paralyzed you?"* he said, as he closed his eyes. *Tsch... this isn't good.* he thought, as he glanced towards his right hand. Just then, one idea came to his mind. *"...maybe if I apply Purity, it will get better..."* he muttered, as Purity coated his right arm, before he placed it against Jill's body.

The purity gave Jill a white glow, and for awhile, nothing. Then Jill could eventually begin to move her arms, her shoulders, and then her legs. Finally she could move again, and she tried to get up.

"Ah... be careful..." Metal uttered, as he helped Jill, making sure that she wouldn't just collapse. *"You shouldn't strain yourself too much..."*

Once she was on her feet with Metal's help, she looked at him. "Thanks."

"...you're not hurting anywhere, are you?" Metal inquired, as he looked at Jill.

"I don't think so," Jill answered.

"...that's good to hear." Metal uttered, as he sighed. *"Well... with the weather like this, I don't think we can get any training done outside..."*

Jill recollected back to what happened before the incident, and she looked at Metal. "What happened to you?" she asked him. "You weren't yourself..."

"...I could ask you the same question." Metal uttered, as he looked at Jill. *"...for some reason... you acted more like Callous."*

Jill's eyebrows arched uneasily. "...I know...and it worries me..."

"...so, you don't have an explanation for it?" Metal presumed, before closing his eyes. *"...that worries me, as well."*

"Well, I said something this morning though," Jill said. "Remember? I said that mine and Callous' personalities might be..."

"...might be what?" Silver asked.

Jill had stopped for a reason. Something was out there in that storm, and it was coming toward them. She also had a pretty good feeling what, or who it was coming toward them. So Jill stepped toward the mouth of the cave to meet them.

"...Jill?" Silver muttered.

"...Silver." Metal uttered, as he followed Jill. *"Go further into the caves. You're not part of this."*

"...okay?" Silver replied, totally baffled at what was going on, but like Metal requested, he left deeper into the caves, while Metal and Jill entered outside into the rain.

And no sooner had Silver gone, than two figures emerged from the wilderness and approached Metal and Jill. "Ah, still alive I see," one voice spoke, which turned out to be Callous. "You know, you should be careful. You are handling both our lives you know, and when you have a near death experience it doesn't bode well with me."

"...Callous and Johnny." Metal uttered, as he observed both of the figures. *"You're a bit early, wouldn't you say?"*

"Thought I'd pay a visit," Callous said. Then she glanced at Johnny. "Oh yes, you haven't met her have you? That's Jill." Then she smirked at Jill while about to gesture to Johnny. "This is-"

"-Hi Johnny." Jill simply glared back at Johnny. She knew exactly who he was; thanks to Sage's vision she had been shown.

"...so that's Jill, huh?" Johnny noted, as he smirked. "Well, I suppose the pleasure's all mine."

"...how thoughtful of you to pay us a visit." Metal muttered dryly. *"Now, you can leave. We'll have a better chance of getting to know each other tomorrow."* he added, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice towards the end.

"But there's something I want to ask you Callous," Jill said. "Just where are you planning to have the battle anyway?"

Callous glanced at Metal. *I see, so the Toaster hasn't told her anything.* Whilst chuckling, she looked back at Jill. "Well, how would you feel about having the battle at Angel Island?" Callous figured she wouldn't say anything to ruin it. It would only make it more perfect to save it to the very end.

Jill's eyes widened. For the longest time her dreams and Sonic's friends have been directing the girl to Angel Island all along, and she thought this battle would keep her from getting there. But now that Callous suggested it... "...its fine," she said. "We'll see you there tomorrow. Now go away."

"...some attitude she has." Johnny scoffed, just as both he and Callous vanished into thin air.

"... Chaos Control ..." Metal uttered, before closing his eyes. *"...and not just one reading... Johnny was holding onto three Chaos Emeralds ."*

Jill looked quickly at Metal. "How did they get two more emeralds?"

"...I guess they must have raided Westopolis while I was training you..." Metal muttered, before scoffing. *"Seems like not even my personal security systems are a match for her... but only Johnny seems to be carrying them. Whether Callous decides to use Chaos Emeralds or not, I do not know."*

"...I wonder if she can even use Chaos Emeralds," Jill said. "I can only use them because of the relationship between Purity and Chaos energy...but I don't know what happens if Corruption gets a hold of Chaos energy..." She suddenly shuddered. "The two are so destructive alone...but together?"

"...well, the last time *Corruption and Chaos Energy was mixed together, Silver was thrown here, remember?"* Metal said, as he glanced at Jill. *"But still, you'll beat her, no sweat."* he added in an encouraging tone, placing a hand on Jill's shoulder.

Jill just looked at Metal wondering if she could; the more time goes by, the more power Callous seemed to accumulate. It seemed like

Callous could control destruction so well, while Jill still had trouble controlling a more stable force like Purity. She really felt like the odds were against her.

...but Brick wouldn't have wanted her to give up hope so easily.

She was surprised. All this time she didn't really think about Brick, and as she quietly turned and started walking back to the cave, she was beginning to realize how much she was missing him.

And if anything were to happen in the battle that she didn't plan on, then she might never see him again.

That left Metal standing out alone in the rain, as he looked down at the ground. *...she has to win... I keep telling myself that.* he thought, before he closed his eyes. *...but three Chaos Emeralds ... absorbed souls... and not to mention, me as leverage...*

Just as that thought ran through his mind, his eyes shot open. *No! I set out to make sure that Jill would win this! She will not die!* Then, he began walking towards the cave as well. *I'd rather have my body destroyed, than living with the knowledge that Jill lost.*

Jill got to the cave and while waiting for Metal, she noticed that Silver was gone. "Where's Silver?" She asked Metal when he made it to the cave.

"I told him to go further inside." Metal replied. *"In case Callous and Johnny were planning on launching an attack, I didn't want him to get involved."*

" I see." Dismissing that, Jill's mind sank back to the depression she was falling into. If she won the battle, good, but if not, so much tragedy would befall her friends, and possibly everyone else. It was hard to stay positive if there was so much pressure on her to do this, and with so much against her...

So it was Jill's turn to unexpectedly grab Metal in a hug, out of insecurity.

While he hadn't expected Jill to hug him, Metal did have an idea as

to why she hugged him. Closing his eyes, Metal returned the hug, patting Jill's back.

"...am I supposed to act like I'm not scared, Metal?" Jill asked, without letting him go. "Because I am...I'm scared about what's going to happen."

"...I can understand that." Metal replied. *"But we both know what Callous could do. If she senses even one moment of weakness from you, she'll prey upon it, mercilessly exploiting it until she wins."* Then, he glanced at Jill from the corner of his eyes, not letting go of Jill. *"You may be scared, and that's normal; if I were human, I suppose I'd be scared as well... but when the fight comes, you need to make sure that Callous never realizes that fact."*

Jill considered those words deeply, and they managed to ease her a little. "...thanks Metal, for everything that you've done for me," she said.

"...you're welcome, Jill." Metal replied, as he closed his eyes.

After awhile, Jill finally let go. "We should...go let Silver know everything's alright." And she turned to head deeper into the caves.

"...let's." Metal nodded, as he followed Jill, whilst his mind raced. *...the bond we've created...* he thought, as he watched Jill. *...don't tell me... we've actually become friends, without knowing it?*

Chapter 71

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-ONE

"So, how would you all say the view is?" At the moment, Sage flew across the ocean, with Milo, Ani, Hunter, Miser, Ripper, Proxy and Lock being carried after her in a psychic bubble, so the change in pressure due to the altitude of Sage's flight wouldn't negatively affect anyone of them.

"It's amazing!" Ani said in awe.

"I can't look," Milo muttered. His eyes were still closed, and had been closed for the trip. He even covered them with his hands for extra effort.

"How much farther, Sage?" Hunter asked curiously.

"According to Proxy's coordinates..." Sage began, as she looked back at the group. "...we should probably get there soon."

"Kekekekeke! It'll be interesting to see what we'll find there!" Ripper laughed.

"...hmph." Lock scoffed, as he was leaning against the side of the bubble, whilst looking down towards the sea.

"...something wrong Lock?" Milo asked, wondering if his mood was indicating the said.

"...hm?" Blinking, Lock glanced at Milo. "...nothing's wrong. I'm just thinking about things..."

"Such as?" Proxy inquired, as he tilted his head.

"Things you people don't have anything to do with." Lock replied, before he looked back down at the sea.

"He's thinking about how utterly cool this is, but he doesn't want to show it." Sage said with a chuckle, which led to the bounty hunter

immediately tensing up, as if the raven had struck a critical point with that statement.

Hunter just smiled. He knew how Lock felt, having someone be able to read your mind 24/7. Though he may have gotten more used to it, it did tend to get on nerves now and then, especially if there were pretty private thoughts in your mind. And Lock didn't seem the social type.

"I wonder how much fun the others are having in Future City," Ani said, speaking her thoughts aloud.

"I wouldn't know." Proxy mused. "They brought their Extreme Gears, so I assume that they'll be racing quite a bit there."

When Proxy said that, Lock closed his eyes, as he recalled the fight he had with Callous, along with how close Punk and Gale had been to possibly being killed. *...wonder if they'll run their mouths to Brick and the others.* he thought.

This time, while Sage had heard what Lock thought, she decided to be quiet about it, as she glanced ahead of her. Then, she noticed something "...hey... do you guys see what I'm seeing?"

While looking, everyone saw a large gathering of storm clouds just in the middle of the air above the ocean. It seemed to be causing havoc below on the water's surface, bringing about uncontrollable waves that were deemed to dangerous to sail with any boat. The storm itself was mind-blowing, conjuring up strong winds, and within the clouds, green lightning flickered.

"...whoa..." croaked Hunter, clearly awed by it.

These weren't the clouds that Milo had seen before, but he could tell this to be the forsaken place that the spirits feared. He even sensed energies around it that might seem...hazardous. "There it is," he murmured.

"Wait," Ani heard Milo, and she was even more shocked. "Are you telling me...THAT'S Angel Island?"

"It must be; it matches the coordinates." Sage noted, as she looked

at the storm with intrigued eyes.

"...still... to think that this massive storm is Angel Island..." Proxy uttered.

"...so, how do you plan on going in?" Lock inquired. "With a storm that vicious, we'd all be torn to pieces before even getting close to the island."

"So we came here all for nothing? Keke..." Ripper uttered, as he sighed.

Miser, in the meantime, was silent, as she eyed the storm with interest.

"...Proxy, do you think you could use Chaos Control to get us in there?" Milo asked. "If you have some of Shadow's memories, and he might have been to Angel Island before...then maybe you could take us in there."

"...it is possible..." Proxy muttered, as he tilted his head. "...well, my memories are kind of hazy... the only thing I can recall from his time is the Metal Overlord and Black Arms incidents..."

"So we're still stuck..." Sage muttered, before sighing.

"...wait." Miser uttered, as she looked at Proxy with interest. "You said something about working without a head... right?"

"...yes." Proxy nodded. "Why do you ask, Miser?"

"...if that's the case..." Miser began, as she looked back at the storm. "...then I can take your head with me into the storm, and if I hit the island, you'll know where to bring everyone."

"Depends if his head can last through the storm," Hunter remarked. But knowing Miser's immortality, it had a chance of working.

"I'll shield him." Miser said, as she placed a head on her chest. "I know that I've been through worse, so..."

"...you'll be safe, then... right?" Ripper uttered, as he looked at Miser

with some worry.

"Of course, Ripper." Miser nodded, before glancing at Sage. "I'll need you to launch me, Sage. Can you do it?"

"I'll do my best, Miser." Sage nodded. "But I'll need to get just a bit closer first, so everyone better hold on!" Then, she slowly approached the storm, making sure not to fly too close.

Milo, in the meantime, thought back about what the spirits told him. The Holy Mother went into the storm, no matter how much it weakened her, in order to sacrifice herself. Why? What purpose did this Holy Mother have anyway? The spirits only failed to find the explanation to that.

"...right, I'm in position." Sage said, as she stopped moving towards the storm, before glancing back at Miser. "Get ready!"

Nodding, Miser approached Proxy, before grabbing hold of the android's head. "...sorry." she said, before tearing his head right off his shoulders with only one pull.

"...hmph. That stings." Proxy muttered, as Miser held his head tightly against her body. "Send us off, Sage."

"Gotcha!" Sage replied, as she focused on Miser. Slowly, the rhino was lifted off from where she stood in the bubble, before she was flung right out of the bubble, rocketing right into the stormy clouds.

Milo watched as Miser dove into the storm, and he closed his eyes. *Hang in there Shadow,* he thought. *If this storm weakened the Holy Mother, it may weaken you as well...*

As the two were flying through the storm, Miser was clinging onto Proxy's head tightly, to make sure that he wouldn't get damaged; however, inversely, the storm was tearing numerous gashes across her body, but with her immortality, it was nothing to her.

In that instant, Proxy winced. "Ow... this is actually hurting me..." he muttered.

"It's hurting you?" Miser uttered in surprise. "How? Aren't you

supposed to be an android?"

"I don't know..." Proxy growled. "...but I think this storm has something to do with it. We'll have to hurry."

Miser nodded, before she looked ahead of her, trying to see if they would reach land soon.

Eventually they passed through the worst of it, coming out on the other side in the middle of a blistering rainstorm. The land they headed for were separate pieces of large land that seemed to be suspending in the middle of the air; all within jumping reach, which lead in two directions; one to the large island, and the other...well, it was shrouded by more of the storm. It was really unknown where it led.

"...hm..." Miser hummed, as she looked from the storm to the island. "...alright, get ready for landing!" she said, just as she landed smack-dab onto one piece of land.

"Argh..." Proxy winced, as he glanced at the storm. "...I don't suppose we're going there."

"Not any of you, at least." Miser said, as she looked towards the storm. "Get everyone here, Proxy."

"...alright..." Proxy muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...Chaos Control!" In that instant, everyone appeared right next to Miser and Proxy.

"Whoa! It's pouring in here!" Hunter shouted, immediately getting drenched in the downpour.

Milo immediately looked at the direction of land that led deeper into the storm. "...that is the source of all the energies swirling around this place," he said. "But our aim isn't that way." Then he turned to the direction that led into the island. "I sense what we're looking for over there."

Just then, Ani spotted something that made her shake at the knees.

Milo noticed this. "What's wrong Ani?"

Ani could only point, after which Milo's eyes followed. Then when he saw what she saw, his mouth hung open.

Someone was standing there, and between this someone and the group were many chunks of the land. Good portions of the body were already decomposed and disgusting, but there were also strange looking markings across the face of what appeared to be a red echidna. All he did was stand there, and stare at them with empty eye sockets.

"...that's..." Proxy uttered in utter shock.

"...kekeke... is that really him?" Ripper uttered.

"...Knuckles the Echidna...?" Lock said in disbelief.

"...he doesn't seem hostile." Sage noted, as she glanced at the group. "If I fly us over him, maybe he'll leave us alone."

"...wait." Miser said, as she was looking towards the storm. "...I have a bad feeling about that place... so you guys wouldn't mind if I went there on my own?"

"But...but what if it triggers him by going that way? Makes him attack?" Milo asked uneasily, staring back at the lifeless husk of a body that was standing over there.

"...if that is the case, he'll only go for me." Miser said, as she looked back at the storm. "Besides... I'm the only one of us who can go through a storm like that, without being killed by it."

"...Miser..." Sage uttered, before sighing. "...there's no telling you otherwise, huh?"

"Keke!" Ripper said, as he approached Miser. "If he tries attacking you, I can hold him off! Kekeke!"

"Ripper..." Miser uttered, before glancing at Milo. "...listen, I just need to see what is with that storm formation. I won't take long; promise." As she said that, she handed Proxy's head over to the lion.

Milo took Proxy's head, still watching the zombie standing over there. Sure, the echidna hadn't moved yet, but he was still afraid that Miser going over there might make him do something unexpected.

He also wondered if the walking dead was another result of the evil that the spirits had spoken of.

"...and Ripper..." Miser uttered, as she glanced at the mantis. "...I appreciate the offer, but it would be safest if only I went there. Don't worry; I'll manage."

"...kekeke..." Ripper uttered, as he gave Miser a weak smile and nod.

"...well, let's go to that island." Sage said, as she flew up a bit, before Milo, Ani, Hunter, Ripper, Proxy and Lock were caught in a psychic bubble, just as the raven flew towards the island, keeping a distance from the zombified Knuckles.

"...then I'll go there." Miser uttered, as she began leaping from platform to platform, making sure to keep her distance from the undead echidna as well, while still keeping on a straight course.

As suspected, Knuckles acted. Seeing Miser heading toward that part of the storm instead of the island like the rest of them, he charged after her. Milo pounded the bubble in fear with a hand, while hold Proxy's head with the other. "Miser!"

Seeing Knuckles rush after her, Miser gritted her teeth, as she kept running towards the storm. *Too bad that I couldn't bring the railgun... I just hope that what I borrowed from Wiper will suffice if things get out of hand.* she thought, as she glanced towards the echidna, to see if she was losing him.

Well, she was doing a good effort keeping far away from Knuckles the Zombie, but she wasn't going to lose him anytime soon. The group could only watch as they faded away from Miser's sight, leaving her on her own.

"...Miser'll be okay, Milo," Ani tried to say; even though seeing a real

life zombie was kinda freaky to her. "It's not like...he can kill her."

"...but it's so scary..." Milo uttered. "...how his body is walking around..." He handed Proxy's body back the head, while rubbing his arms to comfort himself. "...it's an act of abomination to bring the dead to the land of the living like that..."

"You mean, someone did that?" Hunter asked in disbelief.

"...well, we're no stranger to people from the past being resurrected, are we?" Sage said, as she looked ahead of them. "True, Johnny was a result of meddling from someone whose name I won't utter..." As she spoke, images of Colonel Reeds flashed in her mind, making her sight narrow. "...but Bloom and Gloom were a different case, were they not?"

"Still..." Proxy uttered, as he closed his eyes. "...I wonder who could bring him back from the dead..."

"...likely a powerful enemy..." Lock scoffed. "We should all be careful around here; there's no telling who might show up."

Milo felt his stomach knot up apprehensively. That was Knuckles the Echidna; a friend of Tails. There's no telling what the reaction would be if Milo ever said anything about this experience to the Professor...

Back at Mystic Ruins, a helicopter was making its way across the jungles, looking for a certain workshop perched on a tall hill. When it had found the workshop, it reared over to make a landing, causing the winds to act up enough that anyone living inside could feel it through the open windows; or simply hear the roar of the propellers for that matter. Indeed, the old professor living in the workshop heard the helicopter, though he didn't seem to be surprised by this, but more bemused than anything else. "...visitors?" he uttered, as he glanced out of a window, to see who the helicopter's owner was.

Once the helicopter made its landing and shut down, an old bee stepped out of the pilots seat, and came around to escort an elderly rabbit out onto the ground. They were none other than Charmy and

Cream.

Seeing them, Tails couldn't help but smile a bit. "It's been a while since they've come here..." he chuckled, as he went towards the entrance to the house, opening the door for the two.

"Good afternoon Tails," Charmy said, walking with Cream to the house. Somehow, Cream didn't share the same cheerful greeting; in fact, she looked a little saddened. The news she had just learned of moments ago was hard on her, but at least she tried to smile for Tails.

Seeing Cream like that, Tails wondered what had happened, though he smiled as well. "Same to you." he said, as he motioned for them to enter. "Would any of you like some tea?"

"That would be...delightful. Thank you," Cream said, entering inside, while Charmy halted by Tails. Waiting until she was out of hearing range, the bee turned to the fox.

"If you're wondering, I told her the news that Brick told me...you know, regarding Sonic," Charmy said in a serious tone. "I figured she deserved to know..."

"...I see..." Tails nodded, as he glanced at Cream. "...it was a shock to all of us." he muttered. "...so, would you like some tea as well, Charmy?"

"Ah, yes I would," Charmy answered while entering inside.

Later, the three were seated each with their own cups of tea. "So, what have the ones at the Clubhouse been up to lately?" Charmy chuckled, hoping to talk about more pleasant matters in hopes to cheer Cream up.

"Well, earlier today, Brick took a good deal of the kids with him to Future City, likely to have fun racing." Tails chuckled, as he took a sip from his cup of tea. "I saw that Natal, Whisker and Tails Doll were with them, so I'd have to guess that Milo and Proxy are keeping watch back at the Clubhouse."

"...what about Jill?" Cream asked questionably. "Isn't she with

them?"

Charmy looked at Cream in puzzlement. "I thought you knew. Jill is off training."

"Oh, she is?" Cream said in amazement.

"Yes... it's been almost a week, now." Tails said, as he closed his eyes. "She should come home soon, though..." he mused.

"I'll be glad to see her again," Cream said with a genuine smile. Then she started shaking. "...is it cold in here to you?" she asked.

"...hm, now that you mention it, there is a bit of a chill," Charmy murmured.

"...yes, you're right..." Tails remarked. "But that's strange... I didn't leave any windows open..."

Cream suddenly looked down at her feet. A strange black fog was present, looming across the surface of the floor, and it scared her enough that she shot up from her seat with a gasp, dropping her tea as the cup shattered on the floor. Cream's reaction triggered the other two to see it.

"What in the world?" Charmy set down his tea and stood up as well.

"...hn?" Blinking, Tails quickly set down his cup of tea, before standing up, looking at the black mist. "...someone's here..." he muttered, as he glanced towards the hall.

Right as Tails had said that, slow footsteps were heard from around the hall. Blinds automatically shut over the windows, darkening the room to a point where it felt like a cave. Someone came into the room, and the minute Cream saw his pale, cold eyes, she shuddered in fear.

This bat had chopped off his long white pony tail, and traded his old-fashioned garb to a more suitable set of leathers, mainly a black leather coat, though he still kept the linen that was wrapped around his hands.

Charmy stood in front of Cream protectively. The detective's intuition was immediately tingling with bad vibes, recognizing that this character was not good at all.

Tails, while intimidated by this character, certainly didn't show it, as he placed one hand against the table. "...you are?" he uttered.

The bat took a bow. "I am Deity Novagod."

And this made Cream even more afraid to know his identity, providing the news she learned minutes ago.

Charmy clenched both his fists, and while he was afraid as well, he was also angered. "You're...him?"

Before Charmy could step out of line, however, Tails held an arm in front of the bee, before he looked at Deity. "...I see. Now... what brings you to my house?" he said, trying to act as calmly as he could.

"Questioning," Deity answered. "I wish to know the whereabouts of the resting places of your friends." Then his eyes grew even colder. "Especially the resting place of the blue hedgehog."

"...Sonic..." Tails uttered, without losing his composure. "...pardon my curiosity... but why do you want to know that?" he inquired.

Charmy recalled the things Jill had told, like the things she knew that Deity could do, and his eyes sharpened against the bat. "...he wants to take Sonic's soul," he concluded.

"Precisely," Deity said.

"But he's no threat to you anymore! He's dead now!" protested Charmy. "Why would-"

"-Because even in the afterlife, he fights," Deity answered, silencing Charmy immediately. "If he wishes to fight, then I will simply put it to better use."

"And use his body as a marionette as well I would think?" Charmy supposed, with Deity nodding.

Tails' eyes narrowed, but still, he kept calm. "...hypothetically speaking..." he began. "...if we refuse to tell you, you'd likely kill us... but what guarantee do we have that you simply wouldn't kill us, regardless of what we told you?"

"I intend to clean up my tracks thoroughly, so your hypothetical thoughts are practical," Deity answered. "I already made the mistake of letting one live once, and I don't intend to do it again."

"...who was that one you let live?" Charmy asked.

"...it was Goddess," Deity said.

...Goddess... Tails thought, as he closed his eyes. "...so, even if we tell you..." he said, before looking at Deity again. "...you intend to kill us. Am I mistaken?"

"Correct," Deity answered again.

Hearing that response, Tails sighed. "...I see..." he muttered, before closing his eyes. "...Charmy, Cream... forgive me."

In that instant, he pressed a button underneath his table, which opened a hole right underneath the two, sending them down into the basement. "Tails!" Cream managed to utter out a cry before she and Charmy were gone, leaving Tails alone with Deity as the hole closed itself.

"Selfless sacrifice I see," Deity remarked.

"...they have nothing to do with this, Novagod." Tails said, as he glared at Deity, though now, his eyes were truly angry. "...please, sit down. Let's talk." he said; even though his eyes were maddened, his tone didn't change whatsoever.

"If you wish," Deity said, taking a seat.

Nodding, Tails took a seat as well. *...alright, Charmy... take the Tornado, and get out of here...* he thought, as he eyed the vampire. "...truth be told, Novagod, while Sonic being dead is common knowledge these days... only I know where his remains are." he said, still not losing his composure.

"...And?" Deity asked.

"...well... even if I tell you, Novagod... you can't do a thing to Sonic." Tails said, as he looked at the vampire. "...because Sonic's body no longer exists. While our circle of friends believed that he was buried... I cremated him, and scattered the ashes to the winds."

Deity was silent, and he closed his eyes. "...well played, Miles Prower," he congratulated, well without the tone of congrats. "However, who is to say that once I kill you, and take your soul, that his soul won't come in attempt to rescue you?"

"...if he has decided to fight you..." Tails uttered, as he kept looking at Deity. "...and if you take my soul... he'll know to stay away. Insignificant as I am in this conflict, I can take care of myself, you know..." Then, he cracked a small smile. "...besides... there's two who will be able to take care of you in Sonic's stead." He didn't know why he somehow counted Metal Sonic into that equation, but deep down, he knew that Jill would be able to kill Deity.

Deity closed his eyes again in some more thought. While he was thinking, he began to unwrap the linen around his hands, revealing the markings on them. "You certainly have thought things through," he said. "But this does not change my mind to kill you. I thank you for your time, Miles Prower." The minute he opened his eyes, Deity shot forward to claw Tails across the face with his long nails.

However, the old fox was a tad bit quicker than Deity, taking flight to avoid getting clawed by the vampire. "Sorry, but I still have some fight in me." he said calmly, before he landed on the floor, having gotten some distance between him and Deity. "Of course... if I engage you in a fight, the victor would be obvious."

Deity suddenly heard something outside; which sounded like the engine of a plane. Outside, Charmy was piloting Tails' orange bi-plane, with Cream riding in the passenger seat, looking back sorrowfully at the shop as the two flew away.

Hearing that sound, Tails smiled. *...you got away... now, allow this old fox one last hurrah.* he thought, before glaring at Deity with a scowl. "Now, Deity Novagod..." he began, as he subtly pressed a

button on the wall behind him. "...with your business here concluded... I want you to get the hell out of my house."

The moment he said that, erupting from the floor underneath Deity, was a massive, two-legged blue mech, which immediately began opening fire on the vampire bat, its machine-guns blazing with such intensity, even years after it was last used. Deity took flight to avoid being hit by any fire, though there wasn't much room to get away with a room that small. Everything around the room was instantly destroyed; the couch tore up, picture frames were knocked off and shattered, and the walls were pierced with holes.

...thanks, Tornado III... With that thought in mind, Tails quickly slipped away down another hall, leaving the massive mech to continue firing at Deity, automatically aiming wherever the vampire tried to evade to.

Deity knew this was only to buy time, so without being hit, he reached over to strike down the machine with a Corruption coated fist, intending to make it malfunction and break down. The moment his fist connected with the machine, as predicted, it began to malfunction; however, its main cannon quickly began charging up, aimed down at Deity. Deity quickly wrapped Corruption around himself like a protective cocoon, which shielded himself from a massive, yellow beam that was unleashed from the mech, engulfing the entire living room in the blast. Once the blast died out, needless to say, the whole living room, along with a good chunk of the house, had been vaporized. Then, the mech slowly collapsed to its knees, shutting down due to the Corruption infecting its systems.

When Deity was unwrapped from the dark cocoon, he looked to see if he could find Tails, flying down the hall that the old fox had gone. While he couldn't find Tails in the hall itself, he'd eventually come across a door that was slightly ajar.

"Simply prolonging your life is useless Prower," Deity said, pushing the door open to see if he was in there.

The moment he opened the door, however, he was met face-first with a sphere of electricity that slammed against him.

"Useless or not..." he'd hear Tails utter, as the old fox was aiming his arm cannon at the vampire, his other hand resting on top of his cupboard. "...I can try, Novagod."

That knocked Deity through a few walls, but the vampire simply brushed it off, like it didn't do a lick of damage at all. "Yes, you can try," he said. "But you can only try for so long before you tire out with your old age." With more Corruption oozing from his hands, he came forward and began to charge at Tails in order to strike him down.

"You're one to talk, Novagod." Tails scoffed, as he lowered his arm cannon. "You may not look like it, but you are far older than I am... am I mistaken?" As he spoke, he moved his hand towards one of the drawers of his cupboard. "And even if I die here... Jillian will be there to kill you."

"Such faith...how quaint," Then Deity was close enough to make his move.

Gritting his teeth, Tails shifted his weight to the right in order to avoid the blow, but in the process, he pulled open the drawer of his cupboard, letting its contents spill to the floor, including a small necklace with an orb stuck to it.

Deity pulled back to try again, when his eyes suddenly fell upon that necklace on the ground. He became so entranced by it that he actually lowered his hand while his eyes were locked with it. While staring, an small uneasiness arose within the vampire, but why?

Seeing that, Tails looked down at the necklace as well. *...that's Chip's...* he thought, before looking at Deity. *...why is he stopping?*

Deity slowly stepped away from it, and hissed lowly. It was quite threatening somehow, to a point where he couldn't stand to be near it at all.

Seeing that reaction, an idea popped up in the fox's head. *...he doesn't like it, huh?* he thought, as he quickly grabbed the necklace, before pointing the orb directly at Deity. "...now... get out of my house. You're not welcome here."

Deity backed away; it was as if that necklace was a working repellent against him, and the energies he sensed from it were so...familiar. Before he could control himself, he turned and dove at the ground, sinking beneath it into the fabled "dark," and was gone immediately.

Seeing Deity leave like that, Tails let out a sigh of relief, as he sank to the floor. "...that was... too close..." he muttered, before looking at the necklace. "...thank you... Chip." he said, before he stood up. "...I suppose I'll have to ask Brick and Whisker to help me rebuild the place later on... for now, I need to let Charmy and Cream know that I'm safe." he muttered, before walking out of his room.

"...Proxy, are you okay?" Ani asked, noticing the turn of behavior the android had taken.

"...I'll manage." Proxy muttered, as his body was holding onto his head. "It's just... something about this island... that's affecting me, somehow..."

"Maybe you're just worried about Miser?" Lock presumed.

"I know that she'll be alright." Proxy quickly replied, as he looked at Lock. "But... I can't really explain what's happening..."

"Kekekeke..." Ripper uttered, as he looked back at where they had last seen Miser. "...is she going to be..."

"Come on, Ripper; this is Miser we're talking about!" Sage said, as she tried to stay optimistic. "I'm sure that she's perfectly fine!"

Milo, in the meantime, was leading them on foot to a place where an underground tunnel opened up. "Here...this is where it should lead to the tombs..." he said. "That's where all the trouble started..."

"Wait, did you say tombs?" asked Hunter.

"You mean...more dead people?" Ani rolled her eyes. "Fun..."

"...kekeke..." Ripper chuckled in a disappointed tone. "...everyone in

a tomb is already dead... it's not fun that way..."

"Let's not waste time." Lock said, as he gave Milo a nod. "Take us in."

"We'll probably need a light, though..." Sage mused, before glancing at Proxy. "...I'll borrow your head, thank you very much." she said, before she telepathically grabbed Proxy's head.

"...I get it..." Proxy muttered, as Chaos Energy enveloped his free hands. "...we can use these for lighting the way."

Hopefully, Milo thought, as he entered inside. *The spirits here may have the answer to what happened...* Everyone else followed closely to make sure they stayed together, and for awhile they walked quietly. Eventually, Milo led them into the chambers of the tombs, with the tombs stones.

One quick look around, and Milo's eyes widened. "...no..."

"...what?" Hunter asked.

"...there aren't any spirits here!" the little lion uttered. "It's empty!"

"...it's empty?" Lock uttered, as he looked around him. "Then I guess that the tombstones are just for show, then?"

"Either that..." Sage uttered, as she glanced at Milo. "...or someone took them."

"Now who do we know that can take souls?" Hunter pondered sarcastically, though the answer he felt was pretty obvious.

"...Callous?" Ripper suggested, before shuddering.

"And Novagod..." Sage shot in, before she closed her eyes.

"...if there's not a single soul here, we should leave." Lock said, as he folded his arms. "We might as well see how Miser is doing."

Milo looked around still, wondering if there was at least one soul in here that could explain anything. He just felt really bad because he

may have come here for nothing. While many others followed Lock out, Milo stayed behind a minute.

Glancing down at Milo, Sage sighed. *...hey, put your chin up.* she thought, transmitting those thoughts to the lion. *What happened here isn't your fault...*

...but I still feel like it is, Milo replied in his own head. *I brought us to this terrible place...*

...hey, don't worry. Sage thought. *Proxy can take us to the Clubhouse without any problems, and everything will be fine.* Then, she looked back towards the exit. *...now, let's go. We don't want to keep everyone waiting.*

"...right," Milo murmured aloud, as he and Sage went back through the tunnel.

At the entrance, everyone was just standing there; but it didn't look like it was to wait for them. They seemed to be staring at something outside in shock. Milo pushed his way through. "Why is everyone standing around?" he asked. "Is there something..." and the little lion trailed off when he saw what they saw.

An army of echidna zombies surrounded them, eying the group.

Milo's eyes shrank in fear. "...eep," he croaked. Then there was laughter, which succeeded sending chills down Milo's spine.

In the air, two figures descended down, which turned out to be a pair of butterfly twins that Hunter dreaded seeing again. "Told you we'd come back for you guys!" laughed the pink one known as Bloom.

"...kekekekeke!" Ripper suddenly laughed, though he wasn't exactly happy to see the butterflies. "It's you two!"

"...Bloom and Gloom..." Sage uttered, before she cracked her neck. "...I see you girls haven't changed."

"You know them?" Lock uttered, as he quickly pulled out a pair of guns from within his coat, holding them at the ready.

"Yeah, S-Sage killed u-us," The blue one, Gloom, answered.

"But now we're here! Isn't it great?" Bloom laughed. Surprisingly perky for one so demented, which was more to the creepy factor. "And Daddy left us in charge!"

"...Daddy?" Hunter was confused, until he started making connections. They could use Corruption...Callous called someone Daddy as well...there was only one explanation. "...so Deity Novagod brought you two back to life?"

"Yep!" Bloom giggled.

"...and where can we find him at the moment?" Sage inquired.

"Don't waste your time with questions." Lock shot in, as he glared at the butterflies. "They want to kill us, and we need to get out of here... questioning them will be a waste of time."

Those series of answers brought up an idea in Milo's head, but he was too afraid to speak up. Before he could even gather up the courage to do so, some of the echidna zombies started opening their mouths and roaring.

"Get 'em!" commanded Bloom, which triggered the zombies to start charging after the group.

Milo screamed and clutched to Ani in fear, and she tried to push him off. "Again with the grabbing out of fear?" Ani complained.

"...hm." With a mild shrug, Sage's eyes suddenly began glowing brightly, before a massive psychic wave exploded from her, rocketing at all of the zombies.

"Kekekekekeke!" Ripper laughed, as he brandished his scythe arms, glaring at the zombies. "Bring it on! I'll cut them all up! Kekekekeke!"

"...hmph." Scoffing, Lock simply rotated his guns, before aiming them at the zombies.

Once every zombie got back onto their feet from Sage's wave, the fight was on. It was this point that Ani finally pried herself away from

Milo, and while teaming up with her dad, she and Hunter raised a few rocks that the two shot at good portions of the zombies, crushing some of them while simply knocking down others.

In the meantime, Ripper was dashing at as many zombies he could see, gleefully cutting a swathe of destruction through them, slicing their heads off left, right and center. "Kekekekeke! Taste my blades, zombies!"

Lock, in the meantime, was silently firing his guns at the zombies from a safe distance, nailing every shot he made into the skull of an unsuspecting zombie. Proxy, however, stood closer to Milo, ready to protect the lion in case any of the zombies tried attacking him.

While they fought, Sage slowly floated off the ground, her gaze directed at Bloom and Gloom. "...get ready, girls." she said, as she cracked her neck. "Hopefully, Bloom, your vocabulary has extended from the last time I dealt with you."

Meanwhile, Knuckles was still in pursuit of Miser, just as she was getting ever so much closer to the eye of the storm.

...almost there... Miser thought, as she kept pressing on, casting a glance back at Knuckles. *If I can get into the storm, I should be safe...*

The closer Miser got, strangely enough the slower Knuckles became. He eventually stopped altogether, simply standing there and watching Miser close in.

Noticing that, Miser blinked. *...why is he stopping?* she thought, before looking back at the storm. *...in any case... I can get in now!* Closing her eyes, she rushed right into the storm. The expected was that it tore Miser up again, like before when she had dove into the storm outside of the island, but there was also some strange, invisible force pushing her backwards. Gritting her teeth, Miser kept on pushing forward, in spite of the storm pushing her back. *...please...* she thought, as she tried looking ahead. *...let me see what this storm shields...* The more she pushed, the more it got worse, but as she continued to push, she eventually came to a point where all sense of the storm was suddenly...gone.

Light came from above, and it was surprisingly calm. The air was very active in this place, but other than that, there was no rain or thunder. She really did stand in the eye of the storm. Before here, there was a wooden bridge from the ledge she stood on, to one certain piece of land. On it stood a tall pyramid made from stone, with 7 pillars standing around it; some of them having crumbled in the age of time.

And on top of this pyramid stood the gem of legends, aglow with a brilliant light and occasionally emitting sparks of green energy.

The Master Emerald.

Seeing that gem, Miser let out a gasp, as she slowly approached it. *...the Master Emerald...* she thought. *...it's magnificent... am I dreaming?* No, as much as Miser rubbed her eyes, she wasn't dreaming. There it was, perched on that pyramid, and here she was, walking toward it."...incredible..." Miser uttered, as she looked around her. "...it's serene in here... don't tell me..." Then, as she continued approaching it, she looked up at the Master Emerald. " ...you're the cause of it?"

Of course there was no way for the Master Emerald to literally answer her, but it was a likely possibility; judging from the energy that came off of it.

"...this is incredible..." Miser uttered once more, as she was now slowly traversing the steps up to the Emerald. "...to think, that such an artifact still lingers here... I wonder what the others would say, if they could see this." Reaching the top of the pyramid, Miser had to squint due to the brightness of the big emerald's glow as she looked up at the emerald in awe. "...it's beautiful... but I wonder how it can create such a forcefield?" As she uttered this, she gently reached to place her hand on it.

The moment her hand even touched the emerald, a powerful force bounced back so fiercely that not only did it cause a tremendous amount of pain, but it repelled Miser back off her feet, and even off the top of the pyramid, sending her on her back onto the ground near the foot of the stairs.

"Agh..." Even though Miser was immortal, the fact that the attack had pained her was a surprise to her. "What... what force is that?" she uttered.

The Master Emerald simply returned to its previous, calm state, having knocked away another unwanted visitor that may or may not have wanted to intrude on its own safety.

"...I see..." Miser uttered, before she let out a sigh. "...this means that I came here for nothing." she muttered, before walking back towards the storm. *...and Knuckles still waits for me... can I outrun him again? Or will I be forced to strike him down?* As she thought that, she re-entered the storm.

Through the trial of the storm, Miser emerged on the other side with the storm raging again, and Knuckles stood there once more, having waited for her to come back out.

"...I can't escape from you, can I?" Miser uttered, before sighing. "Very well... I hope that you can forgive me." she said, before pulling out a shotgun. "No regrets."

Knuckles just stood there, undaunted by the shotgun. It didn't even look like there was a hint that the zombie would try to approach Miser at this rate.

Seeing this, Miser tilted her head in surprise. "...you're not going to come at me...?" she uttered. "...is it because of the Master Emerald?"

The zombie couldn't speak, but it did look toward where Miser had come out of; toward the Master Emerald.

"...maybe it is the reason why you're not coming." Miser muttered, before she sighed. Then, she sat right down, looking at Knuckles. "I'm not sure if destroying your body will have any effect on the Emerald... so until my friends come to bring me back, I'll stay here. You won't mind, right?"

The zombie simply stared at her. Then eventually, Knuckles sat down himself.

"...I thought so." Miser said with a small smile, before she closed her eyes, trying to meditate.

Meanwhile, back with the others...

"Proxy," Milo said, trying to keep a grip on himself despite everything going on. "If Deity brought Bloom and Gloom back to life, and they were here the whole time, maybe they know what might have happened here." And he looked toward where the butterfly twins and Sage were battling in the air. "Maybe they might know what we're looking for."

"It is possible..." Proxy uttered, as he looked up at the fierce battle between the butterflies and the raven. "...but if he did resurrect them, would they think of telling us anything regarding Deity?"

"It depends if the information is meant to be hidden from us or not," Milo said. "But we can try..." but he looked at the others fighting off the zombies. "...well, we can try if we can stop all of these zombies..."

Seeing that, Proxy glanced at the fight; so far, Ripper, Lock, Ani and Hunter had no problem with any of the zombies, though with Sage busy with Bloom and Gloom... "...well, we'll just have to wait."

Milo clung to Proxy in fear. *I wish Jill was here...* he thought.

Bloom cackled madly while she fluttered around in random formations, like her sister, who flew her own unique formation; keeping a good deal of Sage's attacks from even hitting them. "Nah, nah, nah nah, nah!" Bloom sung.

Sage remained calm, as she tried scanning the two butterflies' movements, whilst sending psychic waves at them now and again. *...if they could stop moving, this would be easier...* she thought.

"Ahahahaha!" Bloom cackled again.

Gloom suddenly stopped in the middle of the air, and looked back down. "Uh...B-Bloom?"

"What?" Bloom snapped at her sister, while the blue butterfly

pointed down. "...huh?"

All of the zombies ceased the fight, and even started to retreat. They all scattered away into the depths of the island in numerous directions, but the sure thing was that the group below had a break.

"...where did they go?" Ani wondered.

"...did they give up?" Lock uttered in bewilderment.

Gotcha! Before Bloom and Gloom could move away, all of a sudden, the two butterflies were encircled by a psychic bubble, courtesy of Sage. "You're not going anywhere, now!"

"Hey!" Bloom tried pounding against the wall of the bubble to no avail, and Gloom simply cowered behind her. Then she sat. "...well, this isn't good," she muttered.

Milo looked around, wondering why the zombies disappeared, but he was thankful that they were gone. "Sage, could you bring them to the ground?" Milo called up.

"But of course." Sage called, as she slowly floated down to ground level along with the bubble, her focus solely on the two butterflies within the bubble.

Milo managed to walk up to them without losing his grip on fear. He remembered that bad feeling he got not too long ago, and he remembered that these were the butterflies that Tails Doll said he chased away.

"...you're kinda cute," Bloom giggled, which just made Milo shudder.

"Listen, you two." Sage uttered coldly, as she glared at the butterflies. "I won't hesitate to crush you within this bubble, so keep yourselves topical, if you value your newfound lives." she said, before giving Milo a nod. "Ask away, Milo."

"...okay..." he croaked quietly, until he cleared his throat. "...do you know what your...Dad...has been up to?"

"Well he went out, and he didn't tell us about it," Bloom replied. "He

never tells us much of anything."

"...but how could he leave Angel Island?" Milo said. "The only way we've been able to enter this place is because of Chaos Control."

"...h-he got more p-powerful when he-" Gloom was silenced when Bloom clasped her hands over her sister's mouth.

"...when he what?" Sage uttered, as the bubble suddenly got a bit smaller. "Speak up."

"Aw rats, now the cat's out of the bag," Bloom grumbled, letting go of her sister's mouth. "...go ahead Gloom, tell them."

"...there was this woman..." Gloom began, strangely enough without a stutter this time. "...he had fights with this woman for a long time...but one day she came and didn't try to fight. She said that Daddy could take her soul, just as long as he didn't hurt her daughter..."

"...didn't hurt her daughter?" Proxy uttered in surprise.

"Took her soul?" Ripper said with a tilted head.

"...you're not saying that it's..." Lock muttered, as he glared at the butterflies.

"...Goddess." Sage said with an honestly shocked tone in her voice.

Is Goddess the Holy Mother the spirits have told about? Milo wondered in thought. *It would make the most sense.* "...and once he took her soul, he gained enough power to be able to leave Angel Island no problem?" he asked.

"Yes..." Gloom said. "...he left us behind to watch the place."

"...so... in other words..." Lock uttered, as he snarled, whilst glaring at the butterflies. "...she's gone? Forever?"

"...if no one beats Daddy, and releases her," Gloom replied. "And with the power he got from her, it would be very hard..."

"...tsch..." Gritting her teeth, Sage looked down at the ground.

"...Jill can beat him!" Ripper suddenly shouted, as he glared at the butterflies. "She's being trained to take down Callous... and after that, she'll kill that vampire! Kekekekeke!"

"Really?" Bloom butt in with a grin. "Because I heard Daddy say that Jill was going to die soon!"

Milo and Ani both jolted in shock. "...w...what did you say?" Milo asked in utter disbelief.

"You heard me," Bloom continued. "Daddy's kinda like a fortune teller in ways, only by predicting when people are gonna die! He's never wrong either!"

"...she's... going to die...?" Proxy uttered, as he looked up at the butterflies.

"...when did he say that Jill would die?" Sage uttered, before her eyes began glowing, whilst the bubble shrank a bit more. "When?"

"H-he said the m-most he was s-s-sure of was s-sometime tomorrow," Gloom answered out of fear; stutter and all. "...m-maybe when she f-fought Callous."

"...no..." Milo could bear to think that one of their closest friends would... "...you're making it up!" he uttered, almost ready to cry now. "You have to be!"

"...just what does Deity know?" Sage uttered, as one could hear that her voice was slowly losing its composure. "He's been stuck in a gem for months... then he was stuck wandering around this island... and after only a small time of being free from here, he thinks he can spout bullshit like that?"

"...Sage?" Ripper uttered; seeing the raven lose her temper was a rarity.

"I've seen that girl in action!" Sage yelled in an enraged tone, as an aura began building around her. "I know that she wouldn't lose to a cheating skank like Callous! So you'd better believe me when I say

this; Jill is not going to lose!"

Milo grew afraid of Sage, and he hid behind Proxy again.

"Deny it, but we're not fibbing," Bloom said.

"...you despicable little-" Sage growled, but before she could do something irrational, someone placed a hand on her left shoulder. As it turned out, it was Ripper. "...what?" she hissed.

"Sage..." the mantis began, before looking at the two butterflies. "...they're not worth getting mad at... kekeke..."

Milo finally broke down crying, burying his face into Proxy's side. It couldn't be true! But deep down, Milo somehow knew they weren't lying. The spirits were dreading the battle between Jill and Callous, and now that he knew the reason why...

Seeing Milo break down, Proxy gently hugged the lion to comfort him.

"...tsch..." Slowly, the aura around Sage faded, though the twins were still trapped in the bubble. "...tell me something; you can't leave Angel Island manually, can you?"

Gloom's head fell in shame. "No. We're stuck here..."

"Good!" growled Ani, who had also covered up her sorrow with anger. "I think we're done here! After all, we got what we wanted! Let's just get Miser and leave these stupid butterflies to rot in that bubble!"

"If I leave, the bubble isn't going to last." Sage said, before a thought crossed her mind. "...hypothetically speaking... what would happen to you two if you were thrown into the storm?"

Both butterflies shot scared looks at Sage. "...h-hey, we don't need to be that harsh," Bloom started trying to say. "I mean..." she loosened the collar around her neck nervously.

"Do it!" Ani dared Sage.

"...first, let me know what would happen to you two." Sage said, as she smirked. "Or would you rather that I gave you the same treatment like I did 15 years ago?"

"Well, uh..." Bloom gulped, shaking at the knees.

"...it'll hurt...really bad," Gloom said.

"...frankly, the energy from the Master Emerald in the storm could destroy us instantly..." Bloom finally admitted. Both butterflies stared at everyone with small, scared eyes.

Ani grew a wide-toothed grin.

"...well... I hope you two wouldn't mind joining us for a trip, then?" Sage chuckled, before she glanced at the group. "Let's go get Miser, everyone." she said in an eerily cheerful tone, before she began walking down the path Milo had led them up on.

"...kekekeke... Sage is too creepy..." Ripper uttered with a shudder, before he followed the raven.

Watching the group follow the raven, Proxy glanced at Milo. "...hey. Ready to go?"

Milo sniffed up his tears while trying to wipe them away. "...let's go..." he muttered, just as Hunter and Ani made their way after Sage as well.

"...come along, now." Proxy said, as he picked up his head, before taking Milo's arm, leading him after Sage and the others.

"...hmph..." Lock scoffed, as he was the last one to follow the group. With one last glance at the tombs, he followed the others.

Back with Miser, the Knuckles zombie had sat there as silently as ever, but soon he stood up again, and turned to see some figures coming in their direction.

"S-Sage, we can t-talk about this, c-c-can't we?" Gloom started, as she grew more afraid. "I-I-I mean...I was s-s-scared enough when you k-killed us the first time!"

"...that depends." Sage said, as she stopped walking. "Have you two learned your lesson from the last time?"

"I won't change, you hear me?" Bloom roared back at Sage while pounding on the bubble. "I haven't learned whatever stupid lesson you tried to teach me, and I never will!"

"I d-did!" Gloom uttered.

"...well, since we won't see each other again, here's some advice for the road..." Sage began, as she closed her eyes. "...bad girls never get far in life." Then, she glanced towards the storm raging around them. "Don't worry; if you're lucky, you might see Johnny once we send him back where he belongs. But for now... buh-bye."

Then, without any mercy, the psychic bubble shot away from where it floated, rocketing right into the storm.

"We'll see you in hell too, you psychotic witch!" Bloom snarled at Sage, as the bubble plummeted into the storm. While nothing was seen, both screams of bloody murder could be heard, along with the boom of a couple bolts of green lighting striking down the area they had gone down. The others finally made it just in time to hear the screams, until they were finally silenced forever.

"...good riddance!" Ani yelled, throwing her fist in the air. "At least we did some good today getting rid of them!"

Hunter was a little concerned about Ani's behavior.

"...Ani..." Sage said in that calm tone, without actually looking at Ani. "...you'd do well to behave yourself. I may not be a parent of yours, but I can still give you a good spanking if you step out of line."

"...kekekeke... Sage is way too creepy..." Ripper shuddered.

"...and you aren't?" Lock uttered, just as he noticed Miser, who was still meditating. "...she's still safe."

"...Knuckles," Milo murmured, seeing that the zombie hadn't done anything at all to Miser. In fact after having seen the demise of Bloom and Gloom, the echidna zombie began walking away toward

the storm. Instead of trying to walk into it though, he sat again facing that storm, and paying no heed anymore to the group.

Milo got a strange feeling from the echidna.

Ani had seen Knuckles too, but she could care less now. She was trying so hard to hold it in, though through her maddened eyes tears pushed themselves out. Those butterflies had to be making it up just to mess with them! It wasn't going to happen! Ani had gone through too much in her own life, and she was sure that it wasn't going to happen...

Jill couldn't die...She just couldn't.

"...Ani?" of course Hunter wanted to be sure Ani was okay, but when he set a hand on her shoulder, she pushed it away.

"...let's get Miser and just...get out of here," Ani uttered.

"...very well." Sage said, as she glanced at Miser, who was lifted off the ground, before being pulled towards the group. "Did you find anything, Miser?"

"...I'll tell you later." Miser said, as she closed her eyes. "For now... let's go home."

"I'll take us to the Clubhouse; I'll need to have my head reattached." Proxy noted, as he closed his eyes, before the group suddenly vanished, brought away via a Chaos Control.

Chapter 72

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-TWO

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" announced a bright and cheery voice throughout a giant stadium. "We are proud to open up our new Racing Dome to the public, and the very first race to be held in this place is about to begin!" That caused the crowd in their seats to wail excitedly, with waving flags and the flashing lights of cameras.

Up above in a specialized booth, a certain robotic Chao sat with a microphone. "Also, I have the honors of introducing a surprise guest! He's a veteran champion of a good many Grand Prix races in the past, and even now his grandchildren carry the same title as champion. Here with us today to watch the race, is the infamous former leader of the Babylon Rogues, Jet the Hawk!"

Sitting right next to this Chao was an eldery goshawk, whose arms were folded, and whose eyes were closed. "...hrm..." he mumbled, as he seemed to be half-way to fall asleep.

Even the rowdy cheers of the audience didn't serve to wake up Jet very much, but the audience didn't care anyway.

Down below on the stadium grounds, a good many number of racers were pacing around, waiting for the cue to line up on the starting line for the race.

"I'm so psyched!" Rudy said, hopping around their group of friends with his gear in hand.

"You're telling me!" Jack said in an equally excited tone, as he clenched his hands into fists. "I can't wait for this to start!"

"Well, good to see that everyone's prepared." Natal chuckled, as she looked around her. "The crowd is really stoked, I see..."

"No kidding," Brick said, looking down at a ticket he had gotten. According to the guy at the sign up table, these tickets had a

number on them that would determine when and who would race; by numerical order of course. His ticket had the number "15" on it.

Striker looked up from his own ticket, which had the number "7" on it. "How come our numbers are so random and aren't close together?" Striker asked.

"Probably so we aren't racing with friends," Brick supposed with a shrug. "I mean, there are possibilities of teaming up against other racers, and I guess they wanted to eliminate that factor to make it a more competitive race."

Natal glanced at Brick after checking up on her ticket, which had the number "3" on it. "By the way, did any of you catch Cal, Whisker and Tails Doll in the stands? I couldn't see them on the way here."

"I didn't see them." Jack shrugged, as he pocketed his ticket, which had the number "11" on it. "But it's full of people here today, so they might be hidden in the crowd."

"I wouldn't think two robots and a doll would fit in the crowd though," Brick chuckled.

"One robot and a half robot and a doll," Striker reminded. "Cal's not a whole robot."

Brick rolled his eyes while the kids laughed. "Oh, you knew what I meant." Then a pebble hit Brick, "ow!"

From all the way in a dark hallway, hanging upside-down from the ceiling was Cal, and he had thrown that pebble at Brick as a "friendly" reminder that the mistake of words was not appreciated.

"Ahoy, be that really necessary?" Also in the hallway were Whisker and Tails Doll, the former of them glancing at Cal, while the latter looked out at the field in excitement.

"Yes, yes it was," Cal said, turning over and landing on his hand-like feet on the ground. Then he leaned against the wall with folded arms while he looked outside on the Stadium grounds. "But this ought to be interesting to watch," he continued.

"...ye can say that again." Whisker mused, as he looked out towards the stadium as well.

"Ooh, I can't wait! It's gonna be so exciting!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered about. *"When's it gonna start, when's it gonna start?"*

"Whenever the announcer says," Cal murmured.

A Mobian dog dressed in black and white stripes came over to most of the racers, presumably the referee. "Alright guys, I'm going to need the racers with the numbers "1-6" to come up. It's racing time."

"Ah- I got number 3." Natal noted, as she took up her board. "Looks like it's my turn."

"Heh. I got number 1!" They could hear Punk say, as he approached the referee with his board under his arm. "I'm ready to roll!"

Once Natal joined the accumulating group that appeared by the referee, he buzzed in on an earpiece and led the racers to the starting line; closing the entry gate behind them so no one unauthorized could enter.

"And it looks like our first set of racers are lining up at the start!" announced the robotic Chao in the booth, exciting the audience even more.

"Go Natal!" exclaimed Rudy while he hung on the gate.

"You can do it!" Jack cheered, as he also hung on the gate.

Glancing at Natal getting in position, Punk grinned. "An opportunity to race with someone from Team Alpha... this'll be a pleasure!"

"...the pleasure's all yours, then." Natal replied dryly, as she waited for the starting signal.

The track began to clear up, and a strange wall of electricity built up at the starting line, followed with a screen on the arch above that had a countdown timer. "Are you ready Extreme Gear racers?" the robotic Chao asked.

"What do ya think?" Punk chuckled, as he cracked his neck, looking up at the timer. "Get it started, already!"

Natal, on the other hand, was pretty silent, as she watched the timer in anticipation.

"On the mark," The robot Chao started. Then the countdown timer began, as the robot Chao chanted, "3."

The racers quickly began backing up in order to gain momentum.

"2."

Some kept backing up, while others started to slow down.

"1."

Now the racers began running for the electric wall at the starting line.

"GO!"

In the nick of time, the electric wall disappeared; not before electrocuting an early bird racer number 6, but all the others had already taken off, jumping on their gears and zooming ahead on the track as the race began. It didn't take long for Punk to effectively take the lead, as he soared ahead of the racers by a good margin, keeping on the currently straight path. "Hah! Better luck next time!" he taunted.

Natal, however, remained undaunted. She focused on keeping her speed up as she soared right past two of the other racers, keeping up in third while she looked ahead of her. *...next up is a ramp.* she thought.

"Thanks to our HoverCams, we can monitor the racers as they zip through the course!" the robotic Chao said. Monitors above the stadium began flashing video of each racer.

Brick and the group picked up a miniature hand-held monitor to watch each of the racers; particularly Natal.

"Racer number 1 is running a good lead, while leaving the others in the dust," the robot Chao said.

"C'mon Natal!" cheered Striker.

"You can do it!" Jack cheered as well.

As the racers sped across the field, soon enough, as Natal had noticed, they approached a ramp, which separated the race-track with a sizable canyon between them. While there was a path going ahead down below, it seemed like the slower path to take.

"Heh! First obstacle, no problem!" Punk chuckled, as he hit the ramp dead-on, getting massive air-time as he soared to the other side, using that momentum to preform several tricks in mid-air.

When Natal got to the ramp, while she got air-time as well, she chose not to do any tricks, instead simply landing on the other side, blasting after the two in front of her.

"It appears that racer number 3 is catching up with 1 and 5!" the robotic Chao declared.

Hearing that, Punk glanced behind him, seeing that Natal was indeed getting closer to him and number 5. "...kkh... she's good..." he muttered, before he looked ahead of him

What lied ahead of them was a half-pipe formation, which curved itself towards the left, circling around towards the other half of the stadium. However, the half-pipe wasn't entirely safe, as another drop separated it into two, with a speed-booster the only thing that could get the racers across.

"Oh, I'm getting that one!" Punk laughed, as he rocketed towards the booster, hitting it so that he got enough speed to fly over to the next portion. "Piece of cake!"

Just as he said that, however, Natal just hit the booster, passing right by number 5, as she got closer to Punk by the minute.

"Woohoo! Go Natal!" Rudy whooped.

Seeing Natal catch up to him, Punk gritted his teeth. *How is she doing that?* he thought. *Last time I checked, GUN doesn't pay their agents to get good at Extreme Gear!*

Natal, however, still kept quiet, as she slowly began overtaking Punk, while she kept her focus ahead of her. *...first a cliff... then a large drop.* she thought.

"Looks like racer number 3 is gaining on number 1 pretty quickly!" the robotic Chao spoke.

Cal looked on one of the large monitors in the stadium above to watch Natal. Keep at it Natal, you almost have it, he thought.

Soon, the two approached a massive slope which stretched high up in the air. As it was the only path they could take, both of them shot up the slope, rapidly scaling it. However, as it turned out, Natal was deliberately losing speed, letting Punk get further ahead of her.

...hn? What is she planning? Punk thought, though he soon looked ahead of him, grinning. *Well, whatever! If she's not gonna try to win, I'm in luck!*

"Hey, what's she doing?" Striker wondered. Brick didn't answer, since he watched closely to see what Natal was going to do. Cal did so as well.

In that instant, Punk reached the top of the cliff, leaping right off it, letting him see the massive drop back down to the course. "Aw, yeah! Massive air-ti-"

"Now!" In that instant, Natal stepped down on her Extreme Gear, instantly bringing her gear up to maximum velocity which sent her rocketing right off the edge of the cliff. With the massive difference in their speed levels when they leaped off the cliff, Natal soared above Punk, who could only look up at her in surprise. *...I'm in the lead!*

"And racer number 3 takes a surprising dash for the lead!" the robotic Chao exclaimed, which made Striker and Rudy go wild cheering.

Thatta girl, Cal thought with a small smirk.

"...whuh... how'd you..." Punk uttered in surprise, as Natal glanced down at him, giving him a small smile and a wave, before she flew further away from him. *...she's good.* he thought, before he grinned. *Now that I know what she's capable of, I can't just let her win like that!* As he thought that, he got his Gear up to maximum speed, as he shot after Natal, making it a race for the lead in mid-air.

Don't let him pass you Natal, Brick thought in anticipation.

With both of the racers going as fast as their gears could handle, both of them were desperately making sure that the other didn't pass them, as they were literally side-by-side, still shooting through the air. Soon enough, both of them landed on solid ground, though neither of them let their engines rest for even a fraction of a second, as they shot towards their next obstacle; a massive loop.

"It seems like the two racers are closely head to head now!" the robotic Chao said. "Will one pass the other anytime soon?"

Oh, shut up... Cal thought in some slight annoyance.

With the speed both Natal and Punk were racing with, the moment they hit the loop, the cameras across the stadium could only pick out a pair of green blurs cross it in a matter of seconds, though neither of the blurs seemed to gain the edge over the other blur.

"Wow, they're fast!" Rudy commented.

"In the meantime, it seems like racer number 4 is getting a good third ahead of the other racers!" the robotic Chao said; making sure not to neglect the other racers.

"I dasn't think that matters at this point; either Natal or Punk`s winnin' this race!" Whisker commented as he folded his arms, watching the two green blurs speed across the stadium.

"This is really exciting!" Tails Doll said in an enthused tone, as he perched himself on Cal's head. *"Don't you think so too, Uncle Cal?"*

"It certainly keeps you on the edge," Cal answered admittedly. He kept his eye on that screen, hoping to see Natal pass to first.

Still, it seemed like neither of the two racers were gaining an edge, as the two blurs passed obstacle after obstacle with absolutely no problem. After a while, the goal was in spitting distance, with both of the racers shooting for it without a moment's respite.

"With only seconds away from the goal, which of the racers will top out?" the robotic Chao asked, which actually served to excite the crowd even more.

"`Tis gotta be Natal!" Whisker called, as he looked at the screen in anticipation.

"Go, Natal!" Tails Doll cheered, as he watched the two green blurs get ever closer to the goal, before both of them passed the goal post; with the speed they were going at, it was just about impossible to determine which one of them got there first without a photo finish.

"Wow! Look at that!" the robotic Chao said over the roaring crowd. "To the naked eye, we couldn't possibly tell! For this, we'll have to refer to the replay in slow motion in order to determine the winner!"

On the screens, it pictured Natal and Punk heading for the goal just the same, and then at the last moment it was stopped, in order to be played very slowly. The whole crowd seemed to go silent in anticipation, as the replay showed one of the racers gain just enough ground to pass by the goal before the other.

Natal.

"YES!" Striker blurted.

"There you have it!" the robotic Chao said. "The winner is racer number 3!"

Cal smiled more. *Good job, Natal,* he thought.

"WHOO! She did it!" Tails Doll cheered.

As the crowd roared with excitement, the two racers finally stopped, before they disembarked their Gears. "...I gotta hand it to ya..." Punk muttered, as he glanced at Natal. "...you sure know Extreme Gear. How long have ya been racing?"

"Not that long, to be honest." Natal replied with a shrug. "Still, it was a good race."

"Yeah, but next time, I'll make sure to beat ya!" Punk said with a laugh, before giving Natal a pat on the shoulder. "Count on it!"

Brick chuckled as he set the monitor down for a moment. "For once, Punk's winning streak was broken, heheh." When the referee opened the entry gate for Natal and Punk to walk through, Natal was bombarded with Striker and Rudy.

"You did it Natal!" Striker laughed.

"Well, it was pretty close, though..." Natal said sheepishly, as she scratched the back of her neck.

"But still, Natal, you won!" Jack laughed.

By then, the other 4 racers crossed the finish line and slowed to a stop, exiting the entry gate in exhaustion and frustration. Then the referee stepped up to the groups. "Next up are racers with the numbers "7-12," so come on up."

"Hey, 7's my number!" Striker said, walking up to the referee.

"Nice, my number's 9," and next they knew, Gale joined up with Striker by the referee.

"Ooh, I got 11!" Jack said, as he walked up to the referee as well, his Gear held under his arm.

"This'll be interesting..." Natal hummed, as she watched the racers walk up to the referee. "Who do you think's going to win, Brick?"

"Guess we'll just have to see," Brick said. When the other random 3 racers came, the referee allowed them through the entry gate and then closed it again. Brick thought of something and looked at Rudy. "What number do you have?"

Rudy looked in the pocket of his sweatshirt, "uh...where is it?"

Natal blinked, as she glanced down at Rudy. "Can't you find it?" she

inquired.

"I must have dropped it or something," Rudy said.

"You don't really need it as long as you remember the number that was on it," Brick said.

"Well, let's see..." Rudy scratched his head. "...I think it had number 17 on it."

"You sure?" Brick asked, where Rudy nodded in response. "Okay then," Brick continued, picking up the monitor.

"Now the next race will begin!" the robotic Chao announced. "Take your places, racers!"

"Good luck Jack!" said Striker, once he had taken the line up beside the racers.

"Same to you, Striker!" Jack said, as he gave Striker a thumbs-up, before lining up with the other racers as well.

"Alright you two," Gale said. "Let's see what you got!"

"On the mark," began the robotic Chao, just as that electric gate came up again, and the timer reset itself on the screen above on the arch over the starting line.

"3."

Like before, the racers scooted back a good distance.

"2."

Still backing up...

"1."

Now they took off running, and since Striker was a good runner, he was already ahead of the other racers.

"GO!"

Once the gate was gone, the racers jumped on their gears and took off, with Striker in the lead. "Yahoo!" But it was short lived, since Gale surprised him and passed him up. "Hey!"

"See ya!" she laughed, waving as she sped off.

"That's my sister!" Punk laughed. "Show them who's boss, Gale!"

"Come on, Striker; we can catch up with her!" Jack called, as he came up behind Striker, slowly passing by him. "Let's try and win!"

"Yeah!" Striker said. "Let's go!" and the two of them took off after the female goshawk.

"Racer number 9 has a good lead, but it looks like racers 7 and 11 are catching up!" the robotic Chao said.

"You can do it boys," Brick said encouragingly, even though they likely couldn't hear him.

"Go get her." Natal said with a small smile, as she watched the monitor.

Soon Gale came across the ramp, and took off flying with a majority of tricks before she landed on the top path ahead. When Striker and Jack came to the ramp, the two soared across, but unfortunately it looked like Striker was going to fall on the lower one. And he saw this too. "Uh-oh," he said. "...Jack, I'll catch up! You go after Gale!" And then he landed down below, leaving Jack to land on the top one.

"Okay, Striker!" Jack called, as he raced after Gale, hoping to catch up to her quickly. *...soon, there was that half-pipe thing... good thing I watched the other race before this race began!*

Gale reached the point of the half-pipe, and took the booster to jump across the gap in the middle of it. "I'd like to see you try that, lion-boy!"

"Okay, if you insist!" Jack called, as he hit the booster as well, soaring across the gap, as he still tailed Gale. *...wonder how Striker's doing...* he thought.

Underneath, there was a path that had come up from behind which was the previous path that came from underneath. As Gale came down from the half-pipe, someone popped out in front of her from the path underneath, "What? How'd you get here so fast?"

It turned out to be Striker, who only smiled. "Easy; My gear's a Speed type!"

"Whoo! You're in the lead, Striker!" Jack cheered, as he kept gaining on Gale. "Just speed on, and you'll win!"

"Racer number 7 popped out of nowhere and took first place!" declared the robotic Chao.

As Gale tried to speed up, she wondered just how these kids were beating her. Well, Jack was 17 and older than her, but that was beside the point. *Do they actually have any skill, or is it just that they have really good gears?* She thought. *I wonder who made them...*

Now they were coming up that large slope that took to the air. Striker went up, and tried to do what Natal did by drastically slowing down before a jump.

Oh no you don't, Gale thought. *Two can play at that game!* So she too slowed down, until both of them reached the very edge of the slope and jumped. Since Gale was farther back, she got more air than Striker, and while flying, passed over the bear. Then they landed, and Gale took first as she sped off.

"But racer number 9 stole first place back!" the robotic Chao continued.

"Aah, Striker didn't get the timing right..." Natal groaned, as she folded her arms.

"Timing? What're ya talking about?" Punk inquired, as he glanced at Natal.

"The point of that move was to lull you into going off the cliff without your speed being maxed out." Natal explained, as she kept looking at the monitor. "Once you had gone off the cliff, getting into max speed and passing by over you was the perfect opportunity to gain

the lead."

"...how did you manage to work out a plan like that while in the middle of a race?" Punk uttered dumbfounded.

"I've been in more hectic situations." Natal shrugged, as she watched the monitor, which showed Jack just landing, speeding after Gale and Striker. ...hope those two can get the lead... she thought.

"Hey Jack, I got an idea!" Striker said, pulling back next to the lion as they raced.

"Really?" Jack responded, as he glanced at Striker. "What kind of idea?"

"Remember when you told me that Brick broke through a wall with a crack in it, and there was a secret tunnel?" Striker said. "Well awhile ago, I noticed the same thing past those giant loops that Natal and Punk raced across, but the camera moved too fast to see for sure. If it's there, then you can break through the wall just like Brick, and that should lead to a secret tunnel that the two of us can go on!"

"...that sounds good!" Jack said with a smile, as he quickly looked ahead of him. "Just tell me when you can see it!"

"Okay!"

The three encountered the large loops, and Gale tore her way through them with ease, while Striker and Jack went on them after her.

"Whoa! I'm getting dizzy!" the bear said.

"Just keep looking!" Jack called, as he glanced towards Striker.

Once out of the loop, Gale sped farther away. "See you later, boys!" she laughed.

The minute she took the sharp turn around, Striker saw it. "There it is!" he exclaimed with a point. "It's right there!"

"Got it!" Jack said, as he turned his Gear to where Striker pointed, before speeding towards that direction. "Here we go!"

The two braced for it as they were pretty much heading straight for a wall. While it looked crazy, the plow on the front of Jack's gear was more than enough to shatter the wall, and like Striker thought, it revealed a secret tunnel. Not only that, but it was riddled with speed boosters on the narrow way.

"Sweet!" Striker exclaimed.

"This could give us an edge!" Jack cheered, as he glanced at Striker. "Let's do it!" he said with a wide grin, before he shot ahead, hitting the speed boosters as he went.

Striker followed him on the speed boosters, taking on awesome speed.

Meanwhile, Gale was going along the track and she quickly looked behind her. *That's strange...where did they go?* She found that pretty suspicious, and she knew she had to gain some more distance before-

"Surprise!" Both Jack and Striker came out of another wall, and it was enough to slow Gale down to keep from running into them. With that, the two boys took off for lead.

"High-five!" Striker laughed while raising his hand to Jack.

"We got her good!" Jack laughed, as he returned the high-five to Striker.

Gale growled as the boys sped away. *I'll catch up, just you wait,* she thought. She already lost once to one of them and she would make sure it wouldn't happen again. Throughout the obstacles Gale finally saw her opportunity with a smaller ramp at the side, and looking up, it led to some Air Rings. She smiled to herself as she went up that ramp.

When Striker looked back, he didn't see Gale there at all. "Cool, we lost her!" he said.

"Awesome!" Jack said with a grin, before he looked ahead. "Now, let's give it all we got, and win!"

"Now racers 7 and 11 are coming towards the finish line!" the robotic Chao said, which made Rudy excitedly hop up and down cheering. "Wait a minute, what's that?" and that made Rudy stop in shock.

"Incoming!" Gale swept down between the boys from in the middle of the air, and the turbulence pushed both of them away, allowing Gale first place as she crossed the finish line.

"Racer number 9 wins with a stunning breakthrough!" the robotic Chao announced, making the audience cheer wildly.

"Aw, yeah; that's my sister!" Punk laughed loudly. "Better luck next time, kids!"

"...dang." Natal muttered, as she snapped her fingers, just as Jack and Striker passed the finish line.

The three jumped off their gears, and Gale smiled at them. "You guys were actually pretty good. Who made your gears anyway?"

"Brick did," Striker answered, which surprised Gale.

"Really?" she said.

"Yeah; he made Natal's gear as well." Jack said, as he picked his Gear up. "He's really good at making them, don't you think?"

"...maybe," she murmured, as the other racers finally made it. The referee opened the entry gate again and allowed them to exit, as Brick approached the boys.

"You guys still did good," Brick said.

"Yeah... guess so." Jack said, as he smiled. "Next time, I'll try to win!"

"Guess you and Rudy are up now, Brick." Natal said, as she gave Brick a glance.

"Yep," Brick said, as he handed the monitor to Natal to pick up his own gear.

"Hey Rudy, I had your ticket in my backpack," Striker said, fishing it out for the kangaroo. "You're number 17!"

"I knew it!" Rudy said, grabbing the ticket. "Thanks for holding onto it Striker. I forgot you had it."

Gale turned to Punk. "Hey Punk, supposedly Brick made all their gears. Did you know that?"

"...no, I didn't." Punk mused, as he glanced at the bull. "So, he's the architect, eh? Let's see how his own Gear holds up..."

"Alright, like before, but I'll need racer numbers "13-18" here," the referee said, just as Brick and Rudy came up.

"Good luck to you Rudy," Brick said.

"Thanks, you too Brick!" Rudy said, just as the other 4 random racers were stepping up. The referee led Brick, Rudy and the other racers back through the entry gate, and closed it off, just as he sent word to the higher ups that everyone was accounted for.

"Here it goes..." Natal muttered, as she folded her arms.

"This is gonna be sweet!" Jack said with a grin, as he watched the racers line up.

"Uncle Cal, who do you think is going to win this round?" Tails Doll inquired, as he glanced down at Cal with his head tilted.

"I honestly have no idea," Cal answered the doll on his head. "But this could turn out interesting..."

On the line up, Rudy turned to Brick. "Hey Brick, is it okay if I try to beat you by myself?"

Brick only looked at Rudy. "...sure, I guess," he said with a shrug. "But I'm warning you, I won't go easy."

"That's what I'm counting on!" Rudy laughed, just as the countdown timer reset itself.

"On the mark," The robot Chao said again, allowing the electric gate to come up on the starting line. Already Brick was backing up, which made Rudy wonder.

"3."

Now everyone else was backing up, but Brick was much farther than the others.

"2."

They still were backing up, but Brick started running for the starting line with his gear firmly in hand. Having backed up far enough, he had to run a little ways.

"1."

Everyone else began to run, trying to catch up with Brick, and it would almost be as if he would hit that electric gate.

"GO!"

But it vanished the instant Brick crossed the starting line, and jumping on his gear, he got a free boost ahead to an easy lead, while the other racers darted hurriedly to follow him; Rudy included.

"Looks like racer number 15 starts this race off," the robotic Chao said.

"Hm... he's done this before." Punk assumed.

"Probably; he's likely been doing Extreme Gear longer than me and the kids." Natal said with a slight shrug.

As long as I conserve my air, I can stay in first place, Brick thought, while running down the course.

Meanwhile, Rudy was weaving his way through the crowd as best as he could, and surprisingly enough he was passing some of them.

I knew practicing with Striker yesterday could come in handy! He thought happily.

"Racer number 17 is gaining momentum!" the robotic Chao said. "However, the racers still have yet to catch up to 15." Speaking of, Brick made it to the first ramp, and while taking to the air, he spun and performed some eye-catching tricks which actually dazzled some in the audience. Then he made a smooth landing, which gifted him more air while the audience cheered a little.

Next Rudy and the others came, and like Brick, Rudy actually performed some pretty cool tricks after having watched Brick. Another smooth landing allowed Rudy to take off ahead of the racers and catch up to Brick. "If it's one thing I'm good at, it's imitating!" he laughed.

"They's in th' lead!" Whisker noted, as he folded his arms.

"It's either going to be Rudy or Brick! I don't know who to root for, Uncle Cal!" Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head.

Cal only kept quiet, wondering curiously if Rudy would actually beat Brick. He would surely laugh if that happened...

Next was the half-pipe, and Brick caught that speed boost no problem as he didn't just jump across the gap, he did a flip or two as well over the tall edge, granting him more air fuel as he came down the half-pipe onto the course. Rudy, simply attempted doing the same, but he wasn't that experienced to do those flips, and he ended up losing some of his air on a rough landing, while coming down the half-pipe. Some of the racers popped out of the other path too, putting Rudy behind some places while Brick took off.

"Aah, Rudy's falling behind!" Jack said, as he looked at the monitor.

"Wonder if he can catch up..." Punk hummed.

"There they go up the slope!" Striker said, and Brick leaped high into the air. He stopped a minute and looked at everything; flashing lights, lots of people, and at this height he could almost see the entire track.

"Nice..." afterward he did some tricks to catch some air and with a smooth landing he took off.

Rudy and the other racers made it to that big slope now, and since Rudy wanted to try Natal's little trick, he slowed down as much as he could to charge the energy in Joey. "Don't let me down, buddy!" he said, and at the edge, he jumped.

"Wow! Look at that jump!" the robotic Chao exclaimed, for when Rudy jumped, he was practically soaring high, seeing even more than Brick did which certainly took the kangaroo's breath away. This advantage let Rudy fly effortlessly over the other racers, and even surpass them greatly, while he performed a crazy amount of flips and twists. Then with the perfect landing, he gained enough of a boost to catch right up to Brick.

"Hi Brick!" he laughed, which surprised the bull.

"...now HE got the timing right." Natal noted, before she glanced at Striker with a small smile. "No offense, though."

"None taken," Striker said with a smile. "But this makes it more exciting!"

A sharp turn later, Brick and Rudy came up to those loops, and off they went in a whirl, spinning. Rudy got dizzy, and once the two made it out of the loop he swerved only a little, before he regained equilibrium and continued to chase Brick down. Speed against Power types, which meant Rudy was gradually getting closer to Brick, and Brick was beginning to run low on air.

Then Brick remembered the shortcut Jack took. Somehow, the wall was automatically replaced again, and Rudy had forgotten about it, while finally passing up Brick and making the sharp turn. "Yay!"

While Brick waited until he was gone and crashed through the wall, hitting all the speed boosters that went through the secret tunnel. Thanks to the speed boosters, they refueled the gear.

"Ooh, he went through the tunnel!" Jack said excitedly.

"Wonder which one of them's going to win this..." Natal hummed, as

she rubbed her chin in thought.

Rudy looked back and saw that Brick was gone. Like Gale, he found that strange, but instead of finding it suspicious the kangaroo sped onward with a giddy smile-until Brick popped out of a random wall and took the place in front of him, "Wha?"

Brick got a lot of distance ahead of Rudy before he decided to speed up and try to catch up with the bull again, but by then he was almost toward the finish line. "Aw man..."

"And racer number 15 is the winner!" declared the robotic Chao, as the crowd went nuts.

Brick jumped off his gear and waited for Rudy, and seeing the boy's disappointment, Brick scratched his head guiltily. "Sorry little guy...I'm just more experienced, and I said I wouldn't go easy."

"...aw, that's okay Brick," Rudy said, trying to lighten up. "I wanted to try and beat you all by myself, and I almost did!"

"He's pretty good." Punk conceded, as he folded his arms. "Not just as a racer, but a builder as well. If he and Lock's dad ever met..."

"...hm?" Blinking, Natal glanced at Punk. "What about Lock's dad?"

"You don't know?" Punk uttered, as he glanced at Natal. "Lock's dad is said to be a master when it comes to making Extreme Gears. He supposedly helped Lock build that rifle-gear of his!"

"Really? Cool!" Striker remarked at that, and that's when the other random 4 racers came in, finishing the race completely. The referee opened the entry gate, letting Brick and Rudy out, and Striker came over to the two. "Good job guys!" he said. "Congrats for winning Brick, but you did a good job too Rudy."

"Yeah, you guys really put on a good show." Punk said, before he patted Brick on his shoulder. "Keep it up, and who knows; maybe you can take the championship some day!" he added with a laugh.

Brick chuckled, "Careful saying things like that. You might jinx fate."

"Yeah right, like who believes in that stuff?" Gale said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I suppose we're all done racing for today." Natal hummed, as she glanced at Brick. "Do you want to see the rest of the races, or should we get the others and hit the road?"

"Let's go," Brick said. "To be honest, I don't really want to stick around."

"If you're leaving," The referee cut in, walking up to them. "Then you aught to pick up your complementary prizes on your way out."

Striker looked at the referee questionably. "Complementary prizes?"

"The winners get a golden pass," the referee answered, "which gives them free admission to the Dome."

"Is that so?" Gale asked with interest.

"...well, that does sound like a nice bargain." Natal hummed, before nodding. "Let's go, then."

"Yeah," Brick and the rest of them started to head for the exit. Seeing this, Cal turned to Whisker.

"Looks like they're leaving," he said.

"Aye." Whisker nodded. "Let`s go meet them outside."

"Yeah!" Tails Doll chimed in, as he fluttered onto Whisker's head. *"Let's go!"*

Brick and friends reached the ticket counter they had gotten their numbered tickets at. "Hi," Brick said.

"I saw you guys, you were great," The person in the ticket booth said. "Here are your passes. Good job all of ya." Indeed, the person handed out three golden tickets. Brick took them, and handed out the other two to Natal and Gale.

Gale smirked, and waved the ticket in Punk's face. "Haha! I got a

ticket and you didn't!" she teased.

"Pfft." Punk scoffed with a roll of his eyes. "I'll just get one the next time they decide to hand them out."

"Not bad." Natal hummed, as she looked at her ticket.

"Thanks," Brick told the person in the booth, who only nodded back.

"Hey," Cal, Whisker and Tails Doll came up then.

"Hi guys!" Striker said. "Where were you?"

Gale jumped. "Those guys were here too?" Then her eyes fell on Cal. "Wait a minute, who's he?"

"Yeah... I remember seeing ya before the races, but I never got the name." Punk noted, as he glanced at Cal. "What's your name?"

"...Cal," the monkey answered bluntly.

"...another friend of yours, eh?" Punk muttered, before he extended a hand to Cal. "Nice to meet ya. Name's Punk the Hawk."

"...I know," Cal answered with a glare, even if he did shake Punk's hand. "A long time ago, you knocked me down and rode away on that gear of yours, laughing."

Gale squinted her eyes and took a closer look at the cyborg monkey. Somehow, he did look familiar, and the more Gale tried to think, the quicker she realized what Cal was referring to. "Oh yeah...I remember you." Then the news startled her. "You mean...you're Calculate from the Chaotix?"

Cal turned away. "I used to be. Not anymore."

Gale looked at the cybernetic body he had. "What happened to you?"

"None of your business," Cal replied.

"...you must've gotten in some kinda accident." Punk muttered, as

he let go of Cal's hand. "Well... if you're with these guys, then you're cool with us. Right, Gale?"

"...sure," Gale answered, though the new appearance of the monkey made her a little uneasy. *That technology is pretty advanced,* she thought, just by looking. *I wonder who built it...*

"So like I asked before, where were you guys?" Striker asked. "Did you even see us racing?"

"Aye, we did." Whisker nodded, as he rubbed the back of his head. "But we figured that we didna wanna cause an uproar in th' stands, so we watched from one o' th' hallways."

"And it was amazing!" Tails Doll said in an excited tone. *"You were all like 'PHOOM', and 'WHOOSH', and it was just so intense!"*

Brick chuckled at Tails Doll enthusiasm. "Well, let's all get going. Maybe we can drop by the Professor's again and visit a little." As he started walking off with the others following he waved back at Punk and Gale. "Nice seeing you guys again."

"Yeah, same to you, Brick." Punk noted, as he waved back to the group. "See ya around!"

Once Brick's group disappeared, Gale rubbed her chin. "...they never cease to surprise me," she murmured.

Chapter 73

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-THREE

Glancing out of the cave's mouth, Metal looked out at the storm outside. He wasn't too sure, but to him, it seemed like it was clearing just a bit up. *...still not enough for us to resume training, though...* he thought, as he folded his arms.

"I still think there's something weird with that storm," Silver said, for he and Jill were sitting nearby also looking out the mouth of the cave.

"Why do you think that?" asked Jill.

"I don't really know how fast a storm starts," Silver said. "But that still seemed unnaturally fast...and I don't know. I guess there's something about it that keeps bugging me..."

"...and from what I gather, it only seems to be around here." Metal muttered *. "Peculiar, to say the least..."*

Jill looked outside at the clouds themselves for a silent minute. "...now that you say it Silver, there's something about that storm that seems...bad." She stood up and walked to the mouth, looking back at the two hedgehogs. "Do you think we should take a closer look?"

"After you got struck by lightning?" Silver asked in disbelief.

"...I don't think we should go out without some manner of protection." Metal muttered, as he folded his arms. *"After all, both me and Jill have been hit by lightning thus far, and I'd rather we didn't suffer a repeat performance."*

"...wait, when were you hit, Metal?" Silver asked.

"Long story," Jill replied instead, setting the matter aside. "...I can put a shield around myself, and it should be enough for me to take a quick look by myself."

"...just don't get yourself hurt, Jill." Metal said, as he gave her a nod. *"We'll be waiting for you right here."*

With a nod, a cocoon of white light surrounded Jill, transforming her into her Holy form. After a green, clear bubble appeared around her, she turned and flew up to the sky.

...be safe, now. Metal thought, as he watched Jill fly up into the air.

Reaching close enough to the clouds that would cross the boundaries of safety, Jill stared at them in observation. It was strange seeing clouds up close where the rain was falling from them; but it was also hard for Jill to see with all the trickling rain drops on the bubble around her.

There was something in there that made Jill nervous. It felt like a bad omen of some sort, but geared toward what? And was the answer deeper into the storm?

Somehow, she felt like that. So she flew up and disappeared into the clouds. It was complete chaos trying to fly through it all, and all while Jill got a weirder feeling inside of her the farther she traversed inside this storm. She was flying into unknown places, and inside, she was somewhat scared. When she popped out of the clouds, it was somehow suddenly nighttime, but the storm was all the more destructive.

She felt like she was hovering over a sea of complete darkness in the sky, with dark clouds surrounding something. To her shock, she had seen that place before in her dream, but never like this.

It was that beautiful silver castle; once untainted, but now most of it was in ruins, except for that tall tower that stood on. Dark figures circled around the place like they owned it, and the sight was a regular nightmare.

"Go away..." growled a voice. It was so low and demonic, yet Jill could pick up some recognition in the voice. She froze up and didn't know what to do, but something struck her backwards, shattering her protective bubble, and it hurt even more than when she was punched with Unity. It knocked her back into the storm clouds below,

falling through the storm itself.

Then she finally came out below in the real sky, and as she fell, the clouds started to shrink away and vanish quickly. The sun pierced through and gave light to the wooded area that Jill fell down toward.

This falling... She thought, looking back up at the sky while she free-fell. *...somehow, I've been through this before...*

Then, she suddenly stopped falling, as someone grabbed her in the air. *"...are you alright?"* Metal uttered, as he had appeared underneath Jill, grabbing her before she could fall any further.

Jill blinked a minute since all of that snapped her out of her thoughts about trying to figure out why she felt like she had been through that before. *"...Yeah,"* she said, still looking at the sky. *"But what I saw...it definitely wasn't normal, Metal."*

"...what did you see?" Metal inquired, as he glanced up at the now clear and sunny sky.

Her mind flashed back to the nightmare she saw. *"...a castle,"* she murmured, as if lost in her own trance. *"...surrounded by darkness."*

"...is that right..." Metal uttered; somehow, he had a good feeling as to what castle that was. *...Goddess...*

"...and the thing is...I saw that castle in a dream before," Jill said, turning away from the sky. Looking at herself, her jaw dropped again. The markings from her hands and arms had grown again, having wrapped around her upper body and crawled someway toward her neck.

Blinking, Metal glanced down at Jill, and the moment he noticed the markings, his eyes widened. *"...what the... how did that happen?"* he uttered. Quickly, he glanced down at his hand, to see if his markings had been affected in any way. They had shrunk and faded a little more than the last time Jill glanced at them this morning. It seemed like Metal's markings were leaving somehow, while Jill's had grown. *...no...* Looking from his own hand to Jill, the Metallix became increasingly worried. *...why are her markings growing? Is it because*

of the curse? After thinking that, he shook his head. *No, it can't be! Goddess ensured that it wouldn't happen to Jill... unless...*

"...Metal, what's happening?" Jill asked nervously.

"...I... don't know." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...listen, Jill. Don't let those markings get to you. So far, they've only shown to be a threat while you're asleep."* As he spoke, he eventually looked down at Jill. *"And when you beat Callous tomorrow, you'll be sure to stay awake."*

Jill said nothing and only looked at Metal uneasily, but she knew she had to respond somehow, *"...okay."*

"...that's good." Metal said with a nod, before they began descending. *"You should probably rest up. If you need me to make sure that Novagod doesn't toy with those markings while you're sleeping, just say the word."*

"I would feel safer if you did," Jill answered in honesty.

"...alright." Metal nodded . *"Don't worry; you'll definitely win tomorrow."* he added, before the two landed outside of the cave.

Metal was encouraging her so much, that it seemed to have a little of the opposite affect on Jill. Something about it just made her even more unsure, but she did her best not to show it in front of the Metallix. When Metal placed her on her feet, she walked past Silver, who could only be struck speechless by the markings on her. Before he could question this, however, Metal simply placed a hand on the hedgehog's shoulder, with a look that practically asked him to be quiet. A bright light appeared around her, and faded, revealing Jill as her normal self again. Admittedly, she was actually pretty tired. After all, she hadn't slept very well this week; or really, she never slept well at all, and she knelt down on her leaf pile with a yawn.

As she did that, Metal silently formed a puddle of liquid metal around Jill as she laid down, making sure that her arms and legs were properly secured in the metal, before it solidified. *...that should keep her safe.* he thought.

Soon enough Jill actually fell to a peaceful sleep, and once Silver was sure of that, he turned to Metal. "What's going on?"

"...I don't know." Metal replied bluntly, before he sat down against the wall, closing his eyes. *"But I have a gut feeling... regarding someone I need to speak with."* he added.

Silver groaned, "Very informative Metal..." Then he folded his arms.

"...well, I'm not exactly a fountain of knowledge, am I?" Metal shrugged, as he kept his eyes closed. *"...you should probably get some rest, as well."* As he said that, he began thinking. *...perhaps I'll be able to see Novagod again... he must know something about Jill's condition...*

"Fine," Silver answered, sitting down against the wall.

Metal didn't bother giving Silver a reply, as he slowly began drifting off into slumber. *...strange...* he thought. *...why am I falling asleep...?*

Silver noticed this. He kept quiet not to disturb Metal, but he observed with more wonder and curiosity.

Soon enough, Metal's head tipped over, and Silver could hear that Metal was, in fact, sleeping.

Again, I found myself in this foggy forest... though, something seemed off this time around. Everywhere I looked, I could sense malice all over. Just what was going on...?

"I see you decided to come to me," that voice was low and demonic, like a pure demon, but there was no mistaking it to be Novagod's.

Hearing that voice, I closed my eyes, before folding my arms. "...it was the only way I could think of to be able to communicate with you, Novagod." I muttered, as I looked around me. "And right now, I want answers."

A big hulking black creature came out of the mists and approached me, and while it was highly indistinguishable, it stared at me. What seemed like a mouth opened with jagged teeth. "To what questions, pray tell?" it asked, revealing it to be his voice.

"...questions regarding Jill." I replied, staring at the monster before me with a cold gaze. "First off... what's the deal with the markings on her body? They've kept spreading across her for some time, now..."

"Have they?" the creature questioned without a hint of surprise. "And it seems the markings on you are shriveling away..."

"...don't ignore the question." I uttered venomously, as I clenched my hands into fists. "What do those markings on Jill signify?"

"Her mother had put a protective magic around her that shielded her from most of my power," the creature continued. "But now that I possess her soul's energy, the magic will work in a reverse effect, changing gradually over time to harm and cripple her..."

"...so you're saying that..." Hearing those words, I looked down at the ground. "...it won't change a damn thing, you hear?" I spat, before I shot the creature a glare. "Jill is still going to triumph over Callous... and when that's done, we'll come for you, and finish the job."

"Like it or not, her death is coming," the creature said. "Whether it be by my hand, or by some other means..."

Hearing that comment, I snapped. "SHUT UP!" I suddenly yelled, as my right arm morphed into a blade. "What makes you think that you know what's going to happen to her? I'll show you; I'm going to make sure that your prediction will end up meaning nothing!"

"And what makes you think you can do anything to me here?" the creature inquired.

"...this may very well be nothing but a dream..." I muttered, as I held the blade arm up, whilst it slowly began growing in size. "...but at least, I'd like for you to experience first-hand... the force that will spell your doom." In that instant, a dark-green aura flared around my entire body, before I quickly, yet still fiercely, swung the blade at the monster, intending to cleave right through it. While the blade sliced the monster, it withered away like the mists around us, but there was no denying that the creature gave out a screech when it was done.

Watching the creature wither away, I scoffed, as the blade turned back into my arm once more. "...that is the power of Unity." I uttered. "And when Callous is gone... you'll feel it first-hand, Novagod."

"...you would really do everything in your power to ensure her victory, wouldn't you?" the voice continued, even if there was no owner standing around.

"...even if it meant the destruction of my own body..." I hissed, before the aura vanished around me. "...I'd do anything to ensure that she'd win, and that you'd perish."

"Now how did a machine come to act such a way?" the voice asked.

"...you'd be better off asking the creator of said machine." I muttered, as I looked around me. "Unfortunately for you, he's long since passed away."

"I am aware of this," the voice said. "But even then...what would you do once you accomplish your goals?"

"...I'll figure that out once you're gone." I responded. "And while I may not have 'insight' into when people die, like you claim to have... I can safely say that you will not persevere. You will die, either by Jill's or my hand."

"If you wish to think that, so be it," the voice replied. "But your denial of her death could serve to destroy you from the inside out, if the Corruption will have anything to do with it..."

"...I think I can handle Corruption, Novagod." I replied, as I glanced around me. "You should probably be wary of it, as well; I know from personal experience that forces like that have a tendency to backfire."

"...if only you truly knew..." the voice murmured.

"Deny it if you wish, but sooner or later, you might lose control over that force." I continued, ignoring Novagod's little quip. "But even if it doesn't happen, your death is coming. Keep that in mind."

This time, the voice did not reply. Perhaps Novagod grew bored and

departed? With no reply, I closed my eyes. "...hmph." I scoffed, before I began walking through the woods. Would I wake up, soon? Or perhaps I would see something else in this forest?

Just then, Metal's eyes shot up, as he looked around him. *...tsch... damn vampire...* he thought.

"Awake already?" Silver asked, as he was still sitting on that wall. He wasn't sleepy at all, and he had been awake, watching Metal and Jill, whom was still asleep herself.

"...yeah..." Metal muttered, as he held a hand against his head. *"...how long was I out of it...?"*

"Well, I'd say awhile," Silver answered. One look outside, and he saw the sun just beginning to set in the orange horizon.

Seeing the sun outside, Metal tilted his head, before he stood up. *"...I'll be outside for a while. Don't wait up for me."* he said, before walking out of the cave.

"Outside? Why?" Silver asked as Metal was leaving.

"...I need to train." Metal replied briefly, without looking back at Silver. *"I'll probably be out for a while, so as I said, don't wait up for me."*

"...alright," Silver murmured. He was kind of getting fed up being set aside and forced to do nothing, but at least the excitement might start up tomorrow, as he looked at the sleeping Jill.

Boomer was finally done tinkering with the device she had been working on, and with a laugh, she held it up. "Nice!" However, her celebration was cut short by a weird noise she started to hear. "Hm?" It sounded like it was coming outside, and when she took a peek out the window, she saw something coming toward the HQ in the distant sky.

A closer look, and she managed to make out some orange plane. "Huh?"

She wasn't the only one who noticed the plane; currently sitting on the roof of the HQ was Queen, who looked towards the plane with a calm gaze. ...who could that be? she thought.

It was none other than Charmy and Cream in Tails' bi-plane, and it wasn't long before the plane came in for a landing on the helicopter pad. Once the engine died down, Charmy hopped out and helped an exasperated Cream out.

Boomer came outside on the pad just in time to see them. "Captain?" she blurted, and seeing such graves looks on the two of them really worried her.

"...what's wrong?" Queen uttered, as she got to her feet, looking at Charmy. "Weren't you visiting Prower?"

"We were," Charmy replied, with his head hung low. "...but something terrible happened."

"What happened?" Boomer asked, and when Charmy didn't reply, she protested, "Captain, you've got to tell us what happened! I've never seen you this flustered before!"

"Someone else came..." Charmy uttered, while Cream tried to hold back tears. "Tails...he..."

"...who was this other person?" Queen uttered, as she approached Charmy and Cream.

Tears rolled down Cream's face as she looked at Queen in her sorrow. "...it was Deity Novagod," she said shakily.

Hearing that name, Queen reeled back. "...he... came there...?" she uttered, a shocked look on her face.

"Tails..." Cream cried. "...he stayed behind with Deity, and allowed us to escape...but what became of him..."

Boomer was petrified at the news. She even dropped her new weapon that she just finished. "...you mean...Professor Prower...is...?"

At that point, King ran up to the roof, glancing towards Charmy and Cream. "...you're back?" he said, before he scratched his neck. "Good thing you came; someone wants to talk to you on the phone, Charmy."

Charmy looked at King in puzzlement.

"Who?"

"...it's the Professor." King said bluntly.

Hearing that, Queen suddenly glanced at King with a stunned look. "...Professor Prower?" she uttered.

"Yeah." King nodded. "Anyways, he's on the phone right now, waiting for you, Charmy."

"...really?" Charmy pushed through them and hurried inside, and Cream followed, straight all the way to the phone. "...h-hello?" he answered, once he picked it up.

"...Charmy? Is it really you?" he would hear Tails say. *"Thank goodness; you got back safely..."*

"Tails!" Charmy said, making Cream gasp in hope. "You're alive! Better then that, you're alright! Tell me, what happened?"

"...I got some unexpected help from an old friend." Tails replied. *"Needless to say, I have my doubts that Novagod will return to my house..."* Then, he sighed. *"...I'm sorry, for making you worry about me..."*

"As long as you're okay, Tails," Charmy said, as Cream smiled in relief. "I'm just...really glad you're okay..."

"...I can say the same for you two." Tails said in an relieved tone. *"Well, seems like we'll have to finish that cup of tea another day, right?"*

"I guess so," Charmy said with a smile of his own.

"...well, take care, Charmy, Cream. I should start cleaning the place

up over here; it's in a mess. Talk to you later." Tails said, before he hung up.

Once Charmy hung up the phone, he saw Cream cry again, but tears of joy this time. "Oh thank goodness he's alright," she said. "If something were to happen to him..."

"Now, now, Cream, you don't have to think about that," Charmy comforted by gently patting Cream's back, and that's when Boomer and Queen made it down to them. Seeing Charmy's relieved smile, Boomer calmed down and shared the same smile.

"So the Professor's okay?" she asked.

"Yep," Charmy nodded.

"...thank goodness..." Queen uttered, as she closed her eyes, smiling a bit.

"...well, with that out of the way," Charmy said, straightening. "How has the old fort been?"

"Nothing much happened since you took off and Sage took some of the agents with her on that trip," Boomer replied with a shrug.

"Yes; things have been quiet around here." Queen nodded. "Though, I must wonder... just what manner of trip did Sage take Hunter, Ripper and Miser on...?"

I see, so Sage hasn't returned yet, Charmy thought, clearing his throat after ward. "Well, I suppose they'll tell us about it when they get back. In the meantime, I think Cream and I should rest a little...we've almost been through more than we could have handled..." he said, looking to Cream who was just now wiping away her eyes.

"...I see." Queen noted, before she nodded. "You go and rest up. We'll look after the HQ until you wake up."

With Charmy leading away Cream, Boomer turned to Queen once they were gone. "...I can't believe that Deity Novagod...is loose at last," she uttered.

"...neither can I." Queen muttered, as she folded her arms. "And if Johnny and Callous have been any indication... from what I see, we'll need to pray for Jillian's safety, now."

Boomer tried to hide the chill that crawled up her spine, as she turned and walked away. "I'm going to go see what Newt's doing..."

After such a big congratulations from Natal's many brothers, the group finally climbed aboard a train shuttle, and made their way back to Mystic Ruins. On the way, Brick was eying his golden ticket while thinking; about Jill no less. He still wished she could have been there to watch everyone, and to see him win a race. All this wishful thinking produced a tired sigh of disdain.

"...what's wrong?" he'd hear Natal inquire, as she glanced at the bull from the opposite seat. "Something on your mind?"

"...I hope Brownie finishes whatever she has to do, so she can come back," Brick murmured, without taking his eyes off the ticket."I miss her." When a head fell on his shoulder, he looked over to see that Striker had dozed off, and he chuckled, "poor guy. They sure had a fun time today."

"They sure did." Natal nodded, as she glanced out of the window. "...once this is all done with..." she began, as she rested her head in her hand. "...what do you suppose you'll be doing?"

"What do you mean?" Brick asked.

"Well..." Natal began, as she glanced at Brick. "...when Callous and Novagod are gone, and everything finally begins to settle down, what do you think you'll be doing after that?" Then, she glanced back out the window. "Me... I'm not sure about what I should do. Stay with you guys, or get back to work..."

"...I guess it depends what happens after those two are taken care of," Brick said. "...like whether or not Metal Sonic wants to go back to his attempt at conquering the world."

"...somehow, I get the feeling that he may have abandoned that

goal..." Natal hummed, as she tapped her chin in thought.

"You think that?" Brick asked. To be honest, he still was wary of the Metallix for safety reasons, mostly because he knew that anytime without his knowledge he could hurt Jill, and he didn't like that much.

"Well, let's consider the facts..." Natal said, as she looked back at Brick. "...if Metal really wanted to conquer the world... don't you think he'd have done something to reinforce that claim, like taking over another city? Even if he's with Jill, he'd be perfectly capable of doing that... and yet, he hasn't."

Natal was right, and Brick had to admit that, but he was still not that easily convinced. "...I guess I just like taking everything with a grain of salt," he said. "Especially when things have gotten so crazy..."

"Better to be safe than sorry, huh?" Natal presumed with a slight giggle, before she glanced back out the window. "Well, it's understandable... but at least when tomorrow comes, she'll be back with us."

"...I really hope so," Brick murmured, while looking outside the window. By now the train was coming into the Mystic Ruins Train Station, and the doors opened. Here, Brick shook Striker awake, "C'mon buddy. We're here," he said.

"...we are?" Striker murmured tiredly.

"Yep..." Natal mused, as she got out of her seat. "We're back in Mystic-"

"GUYS!" At that point, Tails Doll fluttered towards the three, looking pretty distressed. *"I saw a bunch of smoke coming from the Professor's place!"*

"What?" Brick was the first to jump to his feet and jump off the train. From the station the hill where the shop stood on could be seen, and he indeed saw smoke. "..oh my God!" he uttered, running down the steps of the train station.

"Brick! Wait for us!" Rudy called, as he and Striker ran out of the train to follow the bull.

"Wait up!" Soon enough, the others immediately pursued Brick, Striker and Rudy, all of them racing towards the fox's house as quickly as they could.

Once they got there, while they did see that a massive, gaping hole was located on the side of the house, Tails was right outside, brushing dust out of the front door with a broomstick.

Brick stood there, letting out a breath of relief. At least the Professor's safe, he thought. As soon as the others caught up, all of them walked up to Tails. "Professor, what in the world happened to your house?"

Cal looked around, meanwhile. His sensors were picking up an unknown residue of energy around and according to the instrument in his cybernetic body, it was unknown, but to his own organic senses he knew this energy. Question was, why did it have a slightly different feel to it than usual? This felt...much darker that Callous' Corruption...

"Hm?" Hearing Brick's voice, Tails glanced in their direction, before smiling. "Ah, Brick. Nice to see all of you again. Did you have fun in Future City?"

"Ahoy, dasn't avoid th' question!" Whisker said, as he looked down at Tails. "Did someone try attackin' ye?"

"...well, a certain hooligan showed up, and demanded some information out of me." Tails shrugged. "He left a little after I sent the Tornado III at him."

"And who exactly was this hooligan, Professor?" Cal asked suspiciously, while folding his arms.

Glancing at Cal, Tails let out a small sigh. "...it was-"

Before he could say anything, something just flew right above them at a high speed, towards the sea. "...hn? Who was that?" Natal uttered, as she glanced upwards.

Looking up towards the ones in flight, Tails Doll tilted his head. "...Sage, Hunter, Ripper and Miser... what were they all doing here?"

he uttered.

"Hey, I remember that Milo said he would go with Sage somewhere," Brick said. "Maybe she was just bringing him back home."

"...true..." Tails hummed, before he returned to brushing away dust. "You should probably go and get some rest. Brick, Whisker, I might need you two to help me fix the holes in the walls later on." he said.

"Alright then Professor," Brick said. Then he turned to the others. "C'mon. Let's get back to Proxy and Milo." But while he and many others turned away, Cal remained standing where he was, looking back and forth between the leaving group and Tails.

"...you hurry along as well, Calculate." Tails said, without bothering to look up at the monkey. "I'm a bit too busy to carry a conversation at the moment; the house needs cleaning, after all."

"I still want to know who it is," Cal said sternly. "The levels of Corruption I'm picking up couldn't possibly belong to Callous..."

"...so you can sense it..." Tails muttered, as he glanced at Cal. "...promise me that you won't tell the others just yet; I don't want to worry them too much, dire though this might be..." he said, before closing his eyes. "...that hooligan was Deity Novagod."

With how shocking it actually was to Cal, he tried to keep his expression unchanged. "...I see," he said. "What did Deity want with you?"

"...he wanted to know where Sonic's grave was." Tails said, his eyes still closed. "And I retorted that Sonic has no grave. In any case, I doubt that I'll see him in my house, again."

"...okay then," Cal murmured, as he started to turn and walk away. Then he stopped again, thinking of something else he should say to Tails. "...Professor...about trying to kill you before," he uttered. "...I was really confused then..."

"Think nothing of it." Tails replied, as he continued to brush away dust. "I'm not the kind of person to hold grudges, so don't worry

about that, Calculate."

Cal said nothing in response, and he was silent for that moment. Then he turned and continued walking away, leaving Tails on his own.

Watching Cal leave, Tails couldn't help but smile, as he continued to brush away dust.

Chapter 74

Some more of that content I warn you about...don't worry, I think this is the last of it...

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-FOUR

Standing before the spring, Metal kept throwing punches into the air, his entire body covered in Unity energy. *...I need to know just what I can do with this power. If I can't properly wield it, I can't use it to fight Novagod...* he thought, just as he began rapidly kicking at the air.

By now, nighttime had fallen, but just barely the beginning of evening. Chaos was standing aside, watching Metal do this in wonder. If only the Metallix really knew what effect that energy had on him...

With increasingly powerful attacks, Metal kept himself immersed by the Unity, as his mind was focused on only one thing; using this energy to combat Novagod. *...with this force, I'll make sure to end it! Just you wait and- "AAAAGH!"* In that instant, Metal felt a burning sensation in his right arm, and he quickly grabbed hold of that arm, looking down at it. *"Wha... what was that?"* he uttered, just as he felt it again, forcing another cry of agony from the Metallix.

Chaos jumped with a start at the first scream, since that was unexpected.

Metal could only glare at his arm with an astounded look. At first, he thought that Callous decided to play some of her tricks again, as he angrily looked around him. *Callous, you little...* he thought, when he realized something. Due to all the times he had been subjected to Corruption thanks to Callous, he knew just what that felt like.

This felt nothing like Corruption.

With that thought in mind, Metal quickly dispelled the Unity around him, and with that, the burning feeling in his arm disappeared. *...what... was that?* he thought, as he looked at his arm in surprise.

Chaos knew what happened, but there was no way the creature could learn how to speak in order to tell Metal.

...it vanished the moment I canceled out Unity... Metal thought, as he sat down on the ground, looking at his arm in wonder. *...could it have some effect on my body?* As he sat there, he suddenly recalled the words Eggman had spoken to him.

"I believe that those three forces; Purity, Corruption and Unity... they're having an adverse effect on that data. That may be the cause of your... unnatural behavior."

As those words played through his mind, Metal held his head. *...is it the Chaos Data, reacting to my usage of Unity?* he thought.

Meanwhile, the water creature only continued to stare at him.

...no matter... Metal eventually thought, as he clenched his hand into a fist, before looking towards the spring. *If the Chaos Data ends up tearing me up because I didn't stop using this energy... I'll use what's left of my body to kill Novagod.* As he thought this, he closed his eyes. *...still... Jill's condition... no doubt, it has something to do with Goddess.* After thinking that, he punched the ground in frustration. *Goddess... I wish I could see you once more... so you could at least verify my thoughts...*

Since Metal was hardly doing anything, Chaos decided to head back to the cave, so he turned and started walking away from the Metallix. After all, he too had to prepare for tomorrow...

As he sat there, Metal kept thinking. *...that castle that Jill claimed to have seen earlier...* he thought, as his eyes shot open. *...does this mean that someone is there?* As he thought this, he looked towards the sky, before he began scanning for signs of Purity. *It's a long shot... but just maybe...*

No matter how much he scanned, no signs of Purity showed up. The

only reading he likely got probably came from the cave. In other words it was just Jill.

"...damn..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *...Goddess... please...* he thought, before he folded his arms. *...if you're still out there... give me some form of sign.*

Metal could suddenly notice a small collection of clouds up ahead, that he was sure hadn't been there before. Seeing those clouds, Metal blinked. *"...huh... I had hoped for something a bit more flashy..."* he muttered, just as a black barrier formed around him. *"...but that works, too!"* Then, he suddenly rocketed right towards the clouds.

As Metal was getting closer, he'd pick up something else from the clouds; something that gave him a bad vibe.

In spite of that, he kept pressing ahead. If the castle is there... maybe she is there, as well! he thought.

Metal finally reached them and struck through the clouds, traversing through the fog regions of the unknown like he had done so before; surely this was a sign that he was heading for that castle. Although the minute he came out of the clouds, he encountered a sky that was much, MUCH darker than any normal night. Like what Jill had seen, he saw the castle indeed, but most of it was in crumbling ruins, except for the tall tower with the dark clouds swirling around its tip.

Instantly, Jill's description could fit this place, which Metal recalled. *"A castle...surrounded by darkness..."*

"...so, this is..." Metal uttered, as he looked up at the castle in awe. To create a bit of lighting, a tendril shot out from his back, before becoming covered in Chaos Energy; a force the Metallix knew wouldn't affect his body any more than Unity would. *"...let's take a closer look."* he hummed, as he flew closer towards the castle.

The closer he got, the more he could see numerous black, gargoyle-like creatures circling the castle as well. They didn't see the Metallix yet, it seemed.

...I should make myself scarce. Metal thought, as all of a sudden, he vanished from sight, having accessed the data of a certain chameleon. *If this was supposed to keep me out, I'm disappointed.* he thought, as he flew closer to the castle, looking for a way inside of it.

While looking for a way inside, his eye caught one figure with bat wings flying down to the courtyard. Upon landing, it showed it to be a certain Mobian bat, only Metal could notice some changes about him since the last time they met face to face; such as his new choice of black leathers and mush shorter white hair.

As he approached an entrance, two more of those gargoyle creatures were standing guard, and they straightened when he passed by. "Welcome back, Lord Novagod," one of them greeted.

...it's him... Metal thought, as he clenched his hands into fists. *...I could kill him here and now... but I have a feeling that he'll be expecting it.* With that in mind, Metal slowly flew a bit closer to the scene, Espio's data keeping him invisible.

Deity simply regarded a nod to the gargoyle, before he entered into the castle.

With the door still open, Metal managed to slip past the gargoyles before the door closed behind him. *...so far, so good...* the Metallix thought, as he clenched his hands into fists.

Deity merely walked on, and Metal followed him toward a certain pair of double doors in the foyer, passing by the landmarks in the room like the crumbled pillars and the dried blood on the walls that he had noticed the previous time he was here. Soon the two made it into the chapel, the very same one that Metal had met Goddess in.

"...How nice of you to visit me, Metal Sonic," Deity said, once he stopped.

With a mild scoff, Metal deactivated the invisibility, as he folded his arms. *"The pleasure's all yours, Novagod... if you can even feel it."* he quipped. *"So, Angel Island wasn't good enough for you? You had to invade someone else's household?"*

"I had some...setbacks, on Angel Island," Deity answered. "This place served a better hideaway to build my forces for the time being."

"...let me guess; you got away from Angel Island because of Goddess." Metal uttered. *"Was that what you intended her to do?"*

"Mostly," Deity replied. "Some trivial things happened on the side, but they don't serve any importance."

"...you're absolutely right." Metal nodded, just as two small tendrils shot from his shoulders. *"Because in a few moments... I'm going to kill you."*

"Is that so?" Any attempts of striking Deity were suddenly rendered useless when they hit an invisible barrier that was apparently shielding the vampire.

"Indeed." Even with this assault rendered moot, Metal merely cracked his neck, as the two tendrils retracted, though not completely. *"Why let you harass anyone any further, when I can just finish you here and now?"*

"Because there is no real logical reason to kill me right now," Deity answered. "While the energies you've come in contact with have enabled you to feel things normal machines wouldn't feel, you would still have to follow logical guidelines. Besides...killing me still won't prevent her death."

"...I threw logic out of the window the moment Jill first defeated me." Metal uttered, as he cracked his neck. *"And she is not going to die... but still, even if it doesn't change anything... your death now will mean less trouble for us later on."* In that instant, Metal suddenly vanished.

Deity merely looked around, and didn't feel threatened in the slightest.

In that instant, a bolt of dark-green energy suddenly shot right at Deity from one of the room's corners; however, there didn't seem to be anyone there.

And the vampire simply jumped aside calmly, letting the energy fly past him.

Before he could land, however, another bolt shot at him from a different corner; still, no one seemed to have been in the corner long enough to have fired it.

While Deity couldn't have landed, he used his wings to propel himself in the air to avoid that one as well.

While he was still airborne, more bolts were fired at him from all four corners of the room, and yet despite that, not once was there even a glimmer of anyone standing in any of the corners.

With a set of simple acrobatics, Deity still eluded them all without a scratch. "Your hatred is so strong, it is intoxicating your mind," he said.

"I don't have time for idle banter." Metal responded, as he still was out of sight. *"So just die."* In that instant, Metal reappeared directly behind Deity, before suddenly jabbing a pair of tendrils covered in Unity at the vampire, with every intention of impaling him.

Yes, it successfully impaled him, and at first, Deity grunted with pain, but he didn't keel over at all. Then he grabbed the tendril that was through him, and clamped down his nails as a dark red Corruption seeped through the tendril directly to Metal himself. "You require more than that to finish me off," he muttered.

And the more the Corruption moved through Metal, the more the markings on Metal's hand started to grow, as well as a tremendous amount of pain.

The burning sensation of this Corruption actually caused Metal to let out a yell of undiluted pain, though he still kept glaring at Deity. *"...you want more?"* he uttered, as he slowly opened his hands, trying to ignore the pain searing through him. *"YOU GOT IT!"*

In that instant, an aura of Unity exploded around the Metallix, before he shot numerous, almost countless amount of tendrils coated in that energy rapidly at the vampire, and in spite of the pain increasing

tenfold, Metal kept on attacking Deity.

Deity still had a hold of that one tendril, and he moved around each attack as best he could, while sending more and more Corruption into his system. *If you claim that Unity is a combination of three energies, then I will simply disturb that balance of the three with Corruption,* Deity thought.

Still firing tendrils of Unity at Deity, Metal began wincing, as the pain was getting to him. *I... will kill this bastard...* he thought, before his eyes shot open. *I'M GOING TO KILL HIM!*

In that instant, liquid metal suddenly shot out from Metal's back, latching onto the walls of the chapel, spreading around the room, all whilst the glow of Unity around Metal kept intensifying.

Hm...it seems to have a strange effect on him, this Unity, Deity thought, while he still evaded the tendrils. Next thing Metal knew, he even started catching more and more of the tendrils, and by a simple grab, he injected more dark red Corruption into it. *Perhaps I should keep aggravating him,* he thought again.

Strangely enough, in spite of all the Corruption being pumped into his body, along with the pained cries the robot uttered, it didn't halt the spread of liquid metal around the room. In fact, it seemed to only speed the process up.

"...is... that... all...?" Metal eventually uttered, as he weakly glared up at Deity, before he suddenly broke into a maniacal, unhinged laughing fit. *"I'm... not... feeling... a thing!"* As he laughed, the glow of Unity spread towards the liquid metal forming around the room, giving off an impressive glow.

Deity looked around, seeing all the Unity in the place. Hm, impressive, he thought, for even though the odds were stacked against him, he was still undaunted. He dug his nails even deeper, and increased the amount of Corruption flowing through.

Still, this only served to make Metal's laughter grow in intensity, as if the machine was literally losing his mind. Truly, the sight of the mechanical hedgehog laughing his head off, as the glow only grew

in force, would be nightmarish to most. *"...now... you..."* Metal uttered, as he stretched his arms out. *"...DIE!"*

Just as he shouted that, beams of Unity were fired rapidly at Novagod from every inch of the room, leaving nearly no room for maneuvering. Even Metal found himself on the receiving end of some of the shots, but he was still laughing, as he only watched the onslaught of beams make their way for Deity.

It was hard to tell. Some of them definitely hit the vampire, causing him to let go of the tendrils, but with so much Unity striking down the vampire, it blocked him from any visible sight as he was completely consumed by Unity.

Still, Metal kept laughing, as he watched the brutal onslaught. *"YES! DIE, DIE, DIE!"* he chanted, his laughter not subsiding whatsoever.

The figure struck down by Unity fell to the floor, onto a part of the liquid metal coated with the energy. From the barrage of beams shooting at him, a single hand popped out. The linen had been taken off, revealing a dark purple glowing marking and the nails dug into the liquid metal itself, spreading a black goo that immediately dispelled the Unity the more it advanced onward.

"That's right..." uttered his voice. "...let your hatred...take over..."

His eyes widening, Metal began shaking with utter rage. *"...you..."* he growled, as he forcibly shot the Unity from his own body into the liquid metal, intending for it to cancel out the black goo. *"Unity hurt Jill far more than Corruption did... and you took a storm of it head-on... so why? WHY? WHY WON'T YOU DIE?"*

While the Unity Metal shot tore a hole through the black goo, the goo only regenerated twice as fast, moving on a conquest of taking over all the liquid metal.

"...your hatred..." Deity's voice grunted. "...is causing you...to misuse it...perhaps it does not do as much damage as you thought it did."

Now that the walls were covered in black goo, the rain of Unity beams ceased, revealing Deity who was banged up pretty bad, but

he stood up as if it had no effect on him whatsoever.

Glaring down at Deity, Metal was seething with pure rage. *"...no..."* he uttered, as he clenched his hands together, just as Unity faded from him. *"...no... no, no, no, no..."* As he kept chanting that, inside his chest, energy began building up. *"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, NO!"* With a deafening shriek of anger, a massive beam shot out from his chest, headed towards Deity; however, this beam wasn't made from Unity.

It was made from Purity.

Deity managed to leap away with a flap of his wings, and the Purity struck down the black goo, keeping it from growing back this time.

But another voice went on in Metal's head that he would surely recognize, coming from a certain blue hedgehog. *"Metal, you have to get out, NOW! You're getting out of control!"*

Somehow, hearing that voice managed to quell Metal's anger. *"Wha-"* Before he could allow Deity to recuperate, Metal took advantage of the clean spot the Purity had created, taking back the liquid metal from all around the chapel, before he instantly warped away.

The moment he reappeared, Metal found himself standing by the spring again, as he looked around him in panic. *"Sonic?"* he called. *"Sonic! Where are you?"*

"In your head, you dork," the voice continued. *"You know, before, I couldn't do this since your head was just a mess of wire and hardware, but now somehow I can...I wonder why."*

Growling, Metal looked around him. *"...never mind! Why did you show up just then?"* he said, ignoring the fact that he was talking out loud. *"Why would you bother trying to save me?"*

"Gee, maybe because there were still things you needed to do before you went and got yourself thoroughly destroyed," Sonic grumbled.

"...such as what?" Metal snapped. *"Don't you get it, Sonic? You're fighting a losing battle! Knuckles, Goddess... both of them taken by Novagod! The only defense you have is Jill... and she might..."* At that point, he sank to his knees, grasping desperately at the grass. *"...she... might..."* As he spoke, he desperately tried fighting the urge to break down in tears.

The voice said nothing, probably surprised at the way Metal was acting.

"...tell me, Sonic..." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...I was utterly defeated by Novagod... and I'll be a live target for Callous tomorrow... what else can I possibly accomplish? We would've been better off if you just let him destroy me!"*

"No, you wouldn't have been better off. " Sonic answered bluntly. " *Had you gotten yourself destroyed right there, then Jill would fight Callous alone, and without you there, Callous could cheat her way to an easy victory."*

"...won't she just do that with me there, as well?" Metal growled, as he tore blades of grass out of the ground in frustration. *"She can inflict pain on me as she sees fit! And with the bond me and Jill have forged... I'm her leverage, and she's going to exploit it for all it's worth! I just know it!"*

"...listen, things aren't as bleak as they seem," Sonic muttered. *"I can't really tell you anything, but you need to trust me when I saw that things might get the worst, before they start to get better."*

"...are you honestly trying to cheer me up with your clichés?" Metal uttered, as he opened his eyes, looking down at the ground. *"...I need to know... if I can't beat Deity... just what can I do?"*

"You CAN beat Deity, but you can't do it alone," Sonic said. *"I may not be a fortuneteller, but when the time comes, I promise you'll have the help you need."*

"...hmph..." Metal scoffed, before he looked at his arms. *"...but until then... what am I supposed to do...?"*

"All you have to do is be patient," Sonic said. *"All the answers will come to you over time."*

"...hm..." Metal hummed, as he slowly closed his eyes. *"...damn spirits..."* he eventually chuckled. *"...they always... feel the need to be... cryptic..."* Then, the machine collapsed on the ground, utterly exhausted from his efforts this night. After awhile, something finally came along and picked up Metal, taking him off somewhere...

Due to Metal's exhaustion, the solidified metal around Jill back in the cave suddenly melted away, which caused Jill to wake up. "Huh?" It was incredibly, strange, but it was also bad, because one look around and Jill couldn't find Metal. "Metal?" When she glanced at Silver, he was still asleep.

She got up, and she was about to go out and search, but something came her way and stopped her. It was Chaos, but that wasn't the exact thing that made her stop; it was who Chaos was carrying back, which was a battered up Metal Sonic.

"Metal?" Once Chaos made it inside the cave, Jill also saw that those strange markings all over Metal, which really concerned her. In spite of that, Metal seemed fairly serene, as if he, too, was asleep.

Once Chaos set him down, Jill looked up to him. "Where did you find him?" she asked. Chaos replied with a point outside, and Jill shook her head. "Aw, never mind. I forgot for a minute that you couldn't talk."

"...mhrm..." Metal muttered, as his head bobbed from side to side; though still, he showed no sign of waking up.

With a small sigh of disdain, Jill sat on the opposite wall. She was so nervous about tomorrow, she probably couldn't go back to sleep anytime soon..."Chaos, tomorrow the match is held on Angel Island," she said, which certainly caught the water creature's attention. Seeing Chaos' reaction to that, she looked up at him. "I bet you could never get to that place, with it being in the air, and no way to fly there, huh?" she asked, getting a nod from the water creature.

By then, a suggestion formed in mind. "Chaos...do you want to come with us to Angel Island tomorrow?"

"Listen..." Milo muttered to the others sitting in the room with him. "...we can't tell the others what we found out..."

"...why?" Ani asked.

"...we just can't," Milo said.

"...I agree..." Proxy muttered; before the group had gathered, Lock had taken the time to reattach Proxy's head where it was supposed to be. "...I don't want to imagine how Brick or the other kids would react to hearing about this..."

Lock, however, was silent, as he leaned against a wall, glancing at the three.

"...but...but what if it..." Ani uttered, although she didn't have the strength to finish that sentence. She also didn't have the opportunity to finish it either, because they all heard a ding coming down the hall where the elevator was. Shortly, the doors opened and right after wards, running feet.

"We're home!" exclaimed Striker.

"CHAO!" Buddy popped out of Striker's bedroom and tackled down the bear. For the past two days the Chao remained at the Clubhouse since all these crazy things happened whenever it went out with everyone, but it was sure glad to see Striker.

"PEOPLE!" Likewise, Tails Doll was quick to fly straight into Ani, giving her a hug around her head. *"You missed out, Ani! Everyone went racing Extreme Gear! There was this awesome tourney, and Natal and Brick won gold tickets!"*

"...really." Lock hummed, as he glanced at the incoming group. "...looks like I missed out." he chuckled.

"...what are the golden tickets for?" Ani asked.

"Free admission to the new Racing Dome they just finished building," Brick came into the room then, along with the rest of them.

"Though, I'm not sure if it's for one person only, yet..." Natal hummed, as she folded her arms. "And I have to wonder if anyone could just take one of the tickets and use it as if it was their own..."

"Likely." Lock shrugged, before he walked down the hall. "Well, now that you're all home, you can go rest up."

"But we haven't even eaten yet!" Rudy laughed, before he started hopping off quickly. "TO THE KITCHEN!"

"Yeah!" Striker said, running after Rudy.

"Coming!" Jack laughed, as he ran after Rudy and Striker.

Seeing them run ahead like that, Natal giggled. "...well, I'll be outside for a while, so don't wait up for me." she said, before she walked towards the elevator.

"...guess I'll have to try and make food, then." Proxy chuckled, as he got up, before walking towards the kitchen as well.

"...I'm actually pretty hungry," Ani said, getting up from her seat and running after the three.

Brick said down next to Milo, chuckling as well. "How about you Milo? You hungry?" he asked.

Milo couldn't stop his ears drooping sadly as he turned away. "...not really," he mumbled.

Noticing Milo like that, Brick blinked. "...is something wrong?" he asked.

"...no," Milo said, getting up from his seat. "...I think I might go to bed early Brick, is that okay?"

"Uh, sure," Brick replied, and the lion walked out of the room instantly, disappearing down the hall toward his room. "Hm, I wonder what got him..." Brick murmured to himself after watching

Milo leave.

"...ye think he`s sad because he didna get t' see th' race?" Whisker proposed with a shrug.

"I dunno..." Tails Doll muttered, as he perched himself on Cal's head. *"...maybe something happened on that trip he took?"*

"That could be a possibility," Cal murmured. *It seems like things have been happening everywhere else anyhow, why not?* he thought; *especially with Deity Novagod on the loose, no doubt. But just what kind of trip did he go on I wonder...*

"What's going on in that head of yours now?" Brick asked, eying Cal suspiciously.

"Nothing really," Cal replied with a casual shrug of his own. Then he took Tails Doll off his head and set the plushie down, walking away. *Maybe I'll go see what Natal's up to,* he thought again.

"...hm." Whisker hummed, as he watched Cal leave. "...well, I think I`ll go an' take a nap, or somethin'." he eventually said, before walking away down the hall. "Good night!"

"Good night, Whisker!" Tails Doll said with a wave, before he fluttered on top of Brick's head. *"Let's go to the kitchen!"*

"Sure," Brick said, standing up from his seat to walk to the kitchen. "I'm pretty hungry too."

Meanwhile, outside of the clubhouse, Natal was sitting on a rock a distance from the clubhouse, simply looking towards the horizon.

"...boo." Right next to her, Cal came from thin air thanks to his cloaking, but he figured he wouldn't scare her anyway. "So missy, what're you doing out here?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"...thinking, mostly." Natal replied briefly, without glancing at Cal. "...tomorrow's the day when Jill fights Callous." she mused, before she closed her eyes. "...what do you think you'll do when she comes back, Cal?"

"To be honest, I don't really know," Cal answered. "With Metal Sonic acting the way he's been acting...I don't think he'll have any need for me anymore."

"True..." Natal hummed, as she scratched her chin in thought. "...say... ever thought of joining GUN, Cal?"

Cal blinked. "...That was always Boomer's thing, but I always wondered myself if I could even get in..." Then he looked away shyly. "I mean, I never really had the right physique to be a solder..."

"I wasn't exactly fit for soldier work, either." Natal said, as she looked up at Cal with a small smile. "And yet, look at where I am today; a member of Team Alpha."

"True," Cal said. "...and I guess the Chaotix Detective agency wasn't really for me, was it?" Then he looked at her. "...you really think I could join GUN?"

"Sure." Natal said with a nod. "In fact, I'll put in a good word for you, once I have to go back to HQ. Maybe you could even join Team Alpha?"

"Depends on whether or not Newt will try to do anything to me," Cal muttered.

"Don't worry about it." Natal said, as she glanced back towards the horizon. "It might be a bit rough to begin with, but he'll warm up to you. I guarantee it."

Cal looked back out at the horizon as well. "Well, if you say so," he said.

Natal only giggled in response. "...the moon looks beautiful tonight." she commented.

"...Yeah," Cal said, smiling, as he put his hand on hers. "Kind of like you."

Hearing that, Natal giggled. "I think you mean, kind of like you." she said with a smile, as she gently tapped her finger against Cal's nose.

"Oh, this argument, I see?" Cal chuckled. Then he reached over and gave Natal a kiss. "Beat that."

"Challenge accepted." Natal giggled, before she kissed Cal back.

Cal put his arms around Natal while he continued to kiss her. Natal, too, wrapped her arms around Cal, as she deepened the kiss. Pulling her closer, Cal's hands stroked Natal's back. Whilst he did that, Natal began stroking Cal's back as well. That caused Cal's tail to creep up and stroke Natal's leg again. As it did that, Natal's tongue began coiling around Cal's tongue whilst the two were still locking lips. For awhile they made out like that, and then eventually, Cal broke away.

"Congratulations on your victory by the way," Cal said, before he returned to kissing Natal.

After a short while, Natal broke away with a slight giggle. "Thanks, Cal; I appreciate it." she replied, before she kissed Cal again.

Returning to the moment, Cal dug his hands underneath Natal's coat. Natal let out a small moan once he did that, before she began stroking Cal's chest. As a response, Cal ran his fingers all along her bare back, and eventually he moved them up in front to fondle her breasts. Another moan escaped Natal's lips, as she began caressing Cal's legs, while her tongue kept dancing around within Cal's mouth. Cal liked that even more, and he got to a point where he reached for the strap that held her jacket on to unfasten it. Caught in the moment, Natal found herself reaching for the strap at the same time, helping Cal with removing her jacket. Once her jacket was off, Cal rubbed her bare shoulders while he continued to kiss her. Likewise, Natal began stroking Cal's shoulders as well, intensifying the kiss between them. After that, Cal reached behind Natal in order to take off her top...

"There's the HQ," Hunter said.

"I see it." Sage nodded, as she prepared to land by the helipad.

"...kekekeke... should we tell everyone... about what we found out?" Ripper said, as he glanced at the others. "Because... I don't want to think about it... kekekeke..."

"...telling everyone could be a mistake. We should keep it secret, for now." Miser muttered, just as Sage landed on the helipad, the psychic bubble that had circled Hunter, Ripper and Miser fading away.

"...but if it does happen, what do we do about it?" Hunter asked.

"...well..." Sage muttered darkly, as she walked past Hunter. "...we could try bringing her back... if we were monsters like Reeds."

"Kekeke..." Ripper uttered, as he looked at Sage. "...but we're not..."

"...for now, let's just keep our cool." Sage said, as she glanced back at the three. "There's no sense in panicking over something that's not set in stone."

"...I guess not," Hunter murmured, heading inside the HQ.

Once the four got inside, they ran into Wiper, who just so happened to pass by them. "...hello." he said with a brief nod to the four. "Done with your trip?"

"Yeah; it was fairly informative, as I suspected." Sage replied with a nod to the cobra. "How's the HQ been while we were gone?"

Boomer noticed them in the hall, and walked up to them. "Oh, hey guys," she said. "The Captain came back in a hurry with Cream on one of the Professor's old planes, and both of them looked pretty scared. When we asked them what happened, they told us that someone came to see them, someone...awful."

"Who?" Hunter asked curiously, to which Boomer gulped.

"Deity Novagod," she answered.

"Keke?" Ripper uttered. "...did you say Deity Novagod?"

"That is awful..." Sage uttered. "...did he say what he wanted?"

"According to the Captain...he wanted to know where Sonic the Hedgehog's grave was," Boomer said. "But he and Miss Cream were forced to escape by the Professor, so that Deity wouldn't harm them. Captain just got off the phone with the Professor, so he's okay...but it was really scary for them..."

"I see..." Sage hummed, as she shook her head. "...to think that he could get out of Angel Island... I thought he was stuck, there."

Glancing at Sage, Miser blinked. *...she's actually pretending not to know anything...* she thought.

Hearing that, Boomer shuddered. She had forgotten that Deity was stuck on that island, and if he broke out... "...I think I might go to bed," Boomer murmured, turning and walking away.

"...me, too." Sage muttered, as she began walking down the hall, casting a glance at Ripper and Miser, who followed her.

That left Wiper and Hunter in the hallway by themselves, as the cobra glanced at the wolf. "...did you guys find out anything?"

Hunter only looked at Wiper a minute. "...Milo and Sage found out what they wanted to know, but all of it was beyond me," he answered with a shrug. "I couldn't really tell you."

"...I see..." Wiper muttered, before he looked out the window. "...tomorrow's the day." he mused.

"...I'm beginning to wonder where Daddy ran off to," Callous said, while filing her nails.

"Does it really matter?" Johnny said, as he cracked his neck a bit. "Once you deal with Jill, we'll make our move against Deity, just as we planned." Then, he clenched his hand into a fist. *Then we'll see who wouldn't be able to master this before they died, Novagod...* he thought.

"...Bloom and Gloom have been gone too," Callous murmured. "Maybe they're still stuck on the island." Hearing herself say that,

she chuckled. "You think we should get rid of them too? I think they'll only slow us down."

"I had been thinking about that..." Johnny mused, as he tapped his chin. "...but I think we could use them before that. They're likely still pissed off about the fact that Sage killed them, so why not have them attack the renegades? Maybe they can kill some of those people before they're driven back..." Then, he smirked. "...and once they've been driven back, we take care of them."

"Good point," Callous admitted. She brought out the little Metal figurine and looked at it with a wicked smirk. "I am going to have so much fun tomorrow."

"I'll bet." Johnny nodded, before he glanced at Callous. "Once you take Jill's soul, are you gonna destroy the tin can? Or are you going to make him suffer even more?"

"I'll make him suffer, and then destroy him," Callous chuckled. While looking at the figurine even longer, she caught sight of some of the memories in the Metallix; some which surprised her. *...so that's where Daddy is,* she thought. Then when she made one single discovery, she became silent.

...Jill's going to die?

That made Callous grin like nothing before, and what started as a chuckle grew to extreme laughter. "I can't believe it!"

"...what is it?" Johnny uttered, as he glanced at Callous. "Did you find something out?"

"Did I!" Callous exclaimed. "So, according to the Toaster, my Daddy told him something that he's trying to deny, and if you remember, Daddy has a gift of foreseeing the death of others, right?"

"...yeah, I think he said something about that." Johnny nodded, before he began thinking. "...wait... if Metal Sonic's trying to deny it... then..."

Callous' smirk could only grow so wide, and she couldn't wait to say it. "Daddy predicted that Jill was going to die!"

"...then it settles it!" Johnny laughed. "Your victory tomorrow is guaranteed! And it's all thanks to that tin can!"

"Ah," Callous finally settled from her laughter, but her wide smirk remained. "Remind me to thank him for that tip when I tear him apart later on," she chuckled.

"Better yet..." Johnny mused, as he chuckled. "...why not just rub it in his face, before you take Jill's soul? If he never told her, but always knew about it... I'd love to see how heart-broken she'd look!"

"Boy, wouldn't that feel good," Callous agreed, when she looked back at Johnny.

"I bet it would." Johnny chuckled, as he folded his arms. "...of course, I know of something that'd feel even better."

"Oh really?" Callous mused, even though she might have a feeling of what it was. "And what would that be?"

"I think you know just what it might be." Johnny chuckled, as he approached Callous, before placing a hand against Callous' cheek. "Or did you forget?"

"Oh, I didn't forget," she chuckled, placing her hands on his chest. "I just tease is all."

"Glad to hear it." Johnny chuckled, before he quickly grabbed Callous, kissing her deeply. Callous took in the kiss with zeal, and began undressing herself again in the midst of it. Still kissing her, Johnny helped Callous get undressed, and once that was done, he immediately pinned her down on the ground, deepening the kiss. Callous started to like it when he pinned her down, and she couldn't keep from letting a moan escape her as she kissed Johnny. Whilst they kissed, Johnny began working with his hands, as he stroked Callous' neck with his left hand, whilst fondling her breasts with his right hand. Callous moaned even more, while she clawed his back.

For a while, they were locked together in a clash of tongues, until Johnny broke apart. "...say, Callous..." he said, as a sly smirk crossed his lips. "...ever thought about using Corruption to enhance

the experience?"

"Now that you mention it, that sounds like a good idea," Callous chuckled. "Let's have at it then."

"Alright..." Johnny chuckled, as a dark aura began swirling around him. In that instant, shooting out from his back came tentacles formed from pure Corruption, as Johnny looked down at Callous with a menacing grin. "...get ready."

Callous only smirked in pleasure.

Chapter 75

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-FIVE

There they go again, Jill grumbled in thought, since she was still sitting against the wall in the cave, wide awake; now with a stomach ache too. But at that moment, it suddenly increased even more, and she had that uncontrollable urge again. Quickly she ran out of the cave, and wherever she stopped she hurled out the contents from her stomach.

After ward, she collapsed next to a tree while she trembled weakly. Luckily, she didn't get any vomit on herself this time, but this was the least of her concern. Right now, she was really nervous. So nervous that it could be considered scared, and she didn't know what to do.

She wanted to go back to her friends and especially Brick. She felt like she really needed him right now; she needed his strength, and his love.

Before she knew it, something fell from her eyes, and the moment she realized it was a tear, she broke down crying right there. She sat in a fetal position and simply cried her heart out. At least Metal wasn't here to see her like this...she couldn't bear to fall apart in front of him.

While he wasn't there, the moment Jill ran out of the cave, Metal finally woke up, as he held his head. *...mph... must've taken more out of me than I thought..* . he thought, before glancing out of the cave. *...did Jill run out just now...?* Getting to his feet, Metal stumbled out of the cave, looking around him. *...where could she have gone off to...?* he thought, as he began trudging through the woods, looking for Jill.

At some point Jill finished crying. *...I should get back to Metal...just to make sure he's still okay,* Jill thought, wiping her eyes away. Then she held onto the tree to help raise herself onto her feet, but it was still quite a chore to do it.

Leaning onto a different tree, Metal held his head in slight pain. *...ungh... it does hurt a lot more after you've rested for only a short while...* he thought; it was strange to think about the fact that he was actually feeling pain, but with Callous and Deity proving to be quite dangerous in combat, Metal would buy anything thrown at him.

Jill managed to walk at least, and she headed back toward the cave...only to stop, when she noticed that Metal was over there leaning on a tree. "Metal?" she gasped, obviously startled by it.

Blinking, Metal glanced towards where Jill was. *"...oh... there you are."* he uttered. *"Is something wrong?"*

"...well...nothing really," Jill answered quietly. "But you're...you shouldn't walk around..."

"...what makes you say that?" Metal uttered with a mild chuckle, as he tried standing up straight. *"I'm just... exhausted from training, is all."*

Jill's brows arched in concern. "...your markings grew all over you, Metal," she said. "I don't think training did...that..." Jill got a little winded just as dizziness hit her, and she held fast to a tree while trying to approach Metal.

Seeing her stumble like that, Metal blinked. *"...is something wrong, Jill?"* he inquired, as he began approaching Jill as well.

"...no, I'm fine," she lied, but really she couldn't move without getting dizzy again.

"...somehow, I doubt it." Metal said, as he stopped in front of Jill. *"When you went to bed, you didn't seem that dizzy..."* he muttered, before he began rubbing his chin. *"...Callous again, huh?"* he presumed.

Jill leaned against the tree, facing away from Metal. "...yes," she murmured.

"...I see." Metal nodded. *"...don't worry, Jill. I'm sure that it'll be the*

last time you'll ever feel like that ever again; especially since the battle's so close."

Jill took a deep breath. "...this is the first time I'm going to face her seriously...even before I sealed Deity away and I was just trying to survive, I didn't have a fair chance to fight back until now..."

"...well, I'm certain that since you have a fair chance of fighting her..." Metal began, as he placed a hand on Jill's shoulder. *"...you'll come through as the victor."*

Jill's head hung low when she heard that. "...why are you encouraging me so much?" she asked.

Metal blinked; he hadn't expected a question like that. *"...well... I want you to win, right?"* he said with a mild shrug. *"And... well, if I'm making you feel uncomfortable, don't hesitate to tell me so."*

"...I guess I'm not used to you being that way," Jill said.

"To be honest, I'm not exactly used to acting this way, either." Metal chuckled, as he rubbed the back of his neck. *"I suppose I'll need to learn a bit more about it when we're done with Callous."*

Jill looked up at the starry sky in the night. "Metal, after everything is over and done with, what do you plan to do?" she asked with curiosity. With the changes that happened to Metal, it was not likely that he would want to go back to what he was doing before all of this, but Jill still wasn't quite sure of that.

"...I'm not sure." Metal hummed, as he folded his arms, looking down at the ground. *"I suppose I might have a clearer answer further ahead in time... but for now, I can't properly answer that question."*

"...I guess that should be expected," Jill said, managing a small smile.

"...hm." Metal hummed, as he closed his eyes. Even though he couldn't smile, it seemed like he was smiling just a bit as well. *"...well, we'll need rest until the fight comes up, right, Jill? Let's go back to the cave."*

"Yeah," she responded, getting up from the tree she was leaning against to check her sense of balance.

"...sure that you don't need to be carried to the cave?" Metal inquired, as he looked at Jill with some worry.

"I'm alright," Jill assured with her smile. "But thanks for your concern." And with that, she began walking slowly to the direction of the cave.

Watching Jill walk towards the cave, Metal folded his arms, before he closed his eyes. *...she needs to win...* he thought, before he walked after her. *...no matter what Callous does to me, Jill needs to win.*

At some point, Jill became dizzy again, holding to another tree. While she only told herself that it wouldn't be long, like Metal said, she was still feeling down from when she cried before. Right now she was just catching her breath while waiting for Metal...

It didn't take long, as the Metallix approached Jill, noticing that she was growing more dizzy. *...she definitely needs some rest.* he thought.

When Jill noticed Metal there, she got back to walking, but the first step she took was the worst, and she fell.

Before she could hit the ground, however, Metal quickly grabbed her, ensuring that she wouldn't collapse further. *"...sure that you don't want a ride?"* he said, as he helped Jill back on her feet.

"...I guess I wasn't going to tough it out forever..." Jill mumbled.

"Don't worry about it." Metal said in an reassuring tone, as he lifted Jill up, holding her in his arms as he began walking towards the cave. *"Some rest ought to work wonders for you."*

Jill's head ended up falling limp against Metal's shoulder while she tried to cope with the dizziness. "I hope so," she murmured.

It took a short while before they returned to the caves, as Metal

gently placed Jill down on her leaf pile, all without a word.

Thanks to the dizziness, it served to raise Jill's drowsiness and as she sank to sleep, she managed to utter out, "...thank you."

"...you're welcome." Metal uttered; he knew that Jill had fallen asleep before he could utter those words, but he still felt like saying them. Then, he sat down against the wall as he kept his eyes on Jill. *...I doubt that you're listening, Callous...* he eventually thought, as he began closing his eyes, a sense of drowsiness overtaking him as well. *...but even if you destroy me... you're going to lose.* Then, he fell asleep.

Striker tried to keep himself from yawning too much, but Brick already caught the act while chuckling. "Looks like bedtime for you guys," he said.

"Aaw, already?" Jack muttered, as he pouted. "I'm not tired at all..." Immediately after he said that, he let out a yawn.

"Yep, I can see that." Proxy noted with a chuckle as well. "Come on, off to bed; you can't sleep the entire day away, tomorrow."

"Chao," Buddy was sitting on top of Jack's head, and he too was rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You know...Brownie might come back tomorrow," Brick said.

"Really?" Striker really perked up when he heard that. "Do you think she'll be back when we wake up?"

"Probably not," Brick said. "But maybe a little later on she'll be home. If you guys go to bed now, you'll be awake enough to be able to see her again."

"...that sounds like a plan!" Jack said with a huge smile, as he quickly grabbed Striker, before bolting down the hall. "We're gonna see Jill tomorrow!"

"...he's certainly lively." Once Jack, Striker and Buddy were out of earshot, Lock approached Brick and Proxy, though now, his rifle wasn't hanging on his back. "How old is he, again?" the bounty hunter mused.

"17, believe it or not," Brick said.

"...is that so?" Lock hummed, before he folded his arms. "He certainly doesn't act his age."

"You're not the first to comment on that..." Proxy noted, before he glanced at Lock. "...doesn't it get hot with that outfit on?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of wondering the same thing," Brick said. "Looks convenient for mighty cold places, but what about the summer heat?"

"As long as I keep my face hidden, I can handle the heat." Lock replied bluntly.

"...but don't you remove the outfit when you go to sleep?" Proxy inquired, as he tilted his head.

"I only remove it when I know that I'm absolutely alone." Lock said with a quick nod to the android. "One can't be too careful, you know."

"No kidding," Brick remarked, thinking back at what Callous did to Lock's back.

"...well, I'll keep watch for a bit." Lock eventually said, as he began walking towards the balcony. "Don't stay up too late, you hear?"

"Same to you, Lock." Proxy said with a nod towards the bounty hunter, who only waved in response before he walked out on the balcony.

"I wonder where that crazy monkey went," Brick said to start more conversation, scratching his chin.

"Yeah... I haven't seen him since I went to make food, earlier." Proxy nodded, as he folded his arms. "...come to think of it... that was the

last I saw of Natal, too..."

Oh the connection was only too weird for Brick, and he stopped scratching. "...those two have been acting strange," Brick said. "It's not obvious, but there's these...little hints of something..."

"...hints?" Proxy inquired, as he glanced at Brick. "What sort of hints?"

"The kids said something about how a bird stole both their glasses last night," Brick said. "But knowing Natal, a simple bird couldn't get away with their glasses, at least not from her. Cal is too much a klutz to defend even his own dignity, much less his glasses, so him I could believe, but Natal?"

"Hm..." Proxy hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...do you think we should ask them about it?" he eventually inquired, glancing at the bull.

"I'm not sure," Brick asked. "I guess we shouldn't worry too much about it; after all, Cal hasn't grown hostile." Then that fact became more apparent to Brick. "In fact, he's sort of calmed down a lot since he's been here..."

"...yeah, apart from the odd reaction when you get on his nerves, he's mellowed out considerably." Proxy mused, as he looked up at the ceiling. "I wonder why, though..."

"...I'm thinking there's something going on between Natal and Cal," Brick remarked, thinking back again on the conversation he overheard between the two that one morning.

"...really..." Proxy mused, before looking away from Brick. "...now that I think about it... when you guys were gone yesterday, Milo couldn't find either of them anywhere in the Clubhouse..."

"...are you serious?" Brick asked with a blink of disbelief.

"Yeah." Proxy nodded. "Or... well, I think Natal had locked herself in her room, and-" In that instant, he stopped.

Brick's eyes widened, and his jaw dropped, making an unmistakable

connection that only baffled him. "...no."

"...as hard as it is to believe..." Proxy uttered, as he held a hand against his head. "...it has to be..."

"...are you two alright?" they'd hear Tails Doll utter, as he was now fluttering behind the two.

Brick looked quickly at Tails Doll, "Oh!" And he tried to straighten up to a casual appearance. "Nothing's wrong, Tails Doll," he tried to say, though it came out as a nervous chuckle. "We were just talking."

"...about Uncle Cal, right?" Tails Doll inquired, as he tilted his head.

"Uh...sure," Brick said. "We were just saying how...uh...nice it was that he wasn't...you know, complaining while he was here or anything."

"I heard something about Natal, as well..." Tails Doll continued.

"...just how long have you been fluttering behind us, Tails Doll?" Proxy inquired.

"I got here when you said something about a locked door..." Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"...what was that about, anyway?"*

Brick shook his head. "Never mind Tails Doll. I'd rather not get into it..." Then something funny occurred to him, which made him grin. "Better yet, you could go ask *Uncle Cal* about it," he chuckled.

"...but I don't know where he is." Tails Doll shrugged.

"...you don't suppose he went outside?" Proxy suggested, as he glanced at Brick. "Maybe Lock can help Tails Doll locate him."

"...yeah, good idea Proxy," Brick continued to chuckle. "If you look outside Tails Doll, you might be able to find Lock standing around on the balcony."

"Okay! Thanks, guys!" Tails Doll said happily, before he fluttered out on the balcony.

"...do you think we should follow him, just to see what happens?" Proxy mused, as he glanced at Brick.

"As much as I want to see the look on Cal's face, we don't want to make a big scene out of it," Brick said. "I say leave it to those two to check on them."

"Fair enough." Proxy nodded.

Out on the balcony, Lock was aiming his rifle around the forest, using its scope to try and locate anyone sneaking about. *...so far, nothing...* he thought.

"Hey, Lock!" Tails Doll suddenly shouted, as he fluttered up behind Lock, who didn't seem to react to the plushie at all. *"Can you help me with something?"*

"...what is it?" Lock muttered, as he glanced back at Tails Doll.

"Well, Uncle Cal is missing, and I don't know where to look for him..." Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"...so can you help me look for him? I think he's outside."*

"...sure, I suppose." Lock shrugged, before he looked back into his scope. "Let's see if we can't find any apes around here..."

Though at the moment, Lock's scope wouldn't locate the two for they were underneath the hiding of a few bushes. After all, Cal knew that Lock could be lurking around at one point or another, and the most he could do was hide from any visible eyes. Although this thought brought other thoughts to the monkey's mind. "Hey Natal?" he said.

"...hmm?" Natal hummed, as she glanced at Cal. "What is it?"

"Don't you think we ought to head back to the Clubhouse, just so we don't arose any suspicion?" Cal suggested.

"...maybe you're right." Natal agreed, as she nodded. "I think we completely lost track of time, for a moment..."

Cal blushed as he scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, I guess

we did..."

Natal only giggled. "Well, no sense in letting them wait, is there?"

"Nope, let's go," Cal said. Carefully he rose up and peeked over the bush, looking around to see if anyone was there.

Whilst he did that, Natal quickly got dressed again.

However, the moment Cal peeked out from the bush, Lock managed to catch a glimpse of him from his scope. "...found you." he uttered, as he pointed at where he spotted Cal. "Go that way, and you'll find him."

"Thanks, Lock!" Tails Doll said, as he began fluttering in the direction Lock pointed. *"Uncle Cal, are you there?"* he called.

Hearing the plushie, Cal jumped. "Oh geez!" he uttered. "I hear someone coming!"

"Really?" Natal uttered in surprise, as she just finished getting her clothes on. "Um... quick, hide!" she suggested.

Cal only dove back down into the bush and kept silent. It didn't even occur to him to use cloaking at that moment.

In that instant, Tails Doll fluttered over the bush, looking around him. *"...he's not here?"* he uttered, as he began fluttering away. *"Man... I thought he'd be around here, for sure..."*

When he was sure he was gone, Cal popped his head back out of the bush. "That sounded like Tails Doll," he murmured.

"...I wonder what he was doing out here..." Natal uttered, as she peeked out from the bush as well.

"Looking for you two, I'd reckon." they suddenly heard Lock utter right behind them.

"Holy crap!" Cal blurted, jumping around to see Lock there.

"Wha- when'd you get there?" Natal uttered in shock, as she looked

at Lock as well.

"I'm a bounty hunter." Lock replied. "If I couldn't sneak up on my target, I wouldn't be a very good one, would I?" Then, he folded his arms. "Now, what are you two doing out here?"

Cal knew he couldn't lie to the bounty hunter, but he struggled to find something to say. "Uh...we were, um..."

"That is to say... um..." Natal uttered, as she looked nervously to the side.

"...actually, don't answer that." Lock said with a shrug. "I get the idea."

Cal cleared his throat in embarrassment. "Well, uh, we should get back to the Clubhouse..."

"Y-yeah..." Natal nodded, as she rubbed the back of her neck.

"...you guys go on ahead." Lock shrugged, as he turned away from them, walking off. "I'll take a look around the area, to see if there's anyone sneaking around."

"Right," Cal said quickly, "Let's go Natal." Then he took Natal's hand and heading back toward the Clubhouse.

"...alright..." Natal nodded, as she let Cal lead her to the Clubhouse.

As they went ahead, Lock glanced back at them, before he looked up at the sky. *...watching over your daughter's friends... is there really nothing else I can do to repay you, Goddess?* he thought.

"Lock?" Then, Tails Doll fluttered towards the bounty hunter. *"I couldn't find Uncle Cal... did you find him?"*

"...he's headed for the Clubhouse." Lock shrugged, as he glanced at the robotic plushie. "If you get there before him, you might surprise him."

"...that's a great idea! Thanks, Lock!" Tails Doll laughed, before he quickly fluttered towards the Clubhouse, not noticing Cal or Natal on his way there.

Once Cal and Natal made it to the Clubhouse, they tip-toed through each hallway, and then they entered into the room with Brick and Proxy. "Well, well," Brick spoke, startling them. "Where were the two of you?"

"Oh...I didn't think you guys would be up," Cal uttered.

"Don't avoid the question." Proxy said, as he folded his arms. "Were you two outside?"

"...yeah." Natal nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, we want to make sure and keep track of everyone," Brick said. "Especially monkey boy."

"Are you still paranoid I'll attack you when your back is turned?" Cal asked, annoyed. "Because I'm not, okay?"

"I can vouch for him, Brick." Natal said, as she looked at him with a serious look. "Cal's a good guy. You likely just got off on the wrong foot with him."

"Hey, hey guys, I wasn't going to attack Cal like that," Brick eased. Then he started chuckling. "I was just going to ask why you two have been spending so much time together."

"What?" Cal uttered, and he couldn't stop himself from turning red.

"Well, I've grown curious," Brick said. "After all, you're holding hands."

Cal had totally forgotten about that and he let go of Natal's hand quickly.

Realizing that, Natal looked to the side, as she couldn't help but blush as well.

Brick just laughed, while Cal turned redder. "Why are you laughing?"

the monkey questioned irritatingly.

"I don't know what's funnier," Brick said. "The look on your faces or the fact that you two hooked up."

Hearing that, Natal turned redder as well, rubbing her arm bashfully. "...when did you..." she began.

"Truthfully, not too long ago." Proxy replied, before Natal could finish her question.

"Looking back on things, we kind of figured it out," Brick added, smirking. "But I still can't believe it happened."

"...well, it happened, so there," Cal grumbled, glaring back at Brick. "Is that all, or do you want to tease us anymore then that?"

"Geez, you should cool down," Brick said. "I'm already enough of a hot-head; we don't need another one."

"Well, you did catch us on the spot..." Natal began, before she shook her head. "In any case, it's getting late. We should all get to bed, now."

"Yep, and I'm heading to bed," Brick said cheerfully, walking past the two down the hall. "Good night everybody."

"Good night, then." Proxy said with a nod, as he began heading down the hall as well.

Once they were gone, Natal glanced at Cal. "...you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm alright," Cal said, looking back at her. "He just annoys the hell out of me is all."

"It'll probably mellow out, over time." Natal shrugged, before she giggled. "You probably wouldn't believe it, but when I first joined Team Alpha, I wasn't exactly on friendly terms with Newt, either. Thinking about it... you and Brick remind me of me and Newt, back in the day."

"I still don't think I'll be friendly with him," Cal murmured.

"I wouldn't be too sure, just yet." Natal said with a small smile, before she kissed Cal's cheek. "But don't lose your head over it, alright?" she added, before walking down the hall. "Good night."

"...good night," Cal said, while he was left all by himself in the hallway.

"Uncle Cal!" Well, not for long, as Tails Doll soon fluttered up behind him. *"I've been looking all over for you! Where have you been?"*

"Oh, you've been looking for me?" Cal asked, suddenly remembering it. "I guess we've kept missing each other...why were you looking for me?"

"Well, I was going to ask you about something..." Tails Doll began, as he tapped his chin. *"...something about Natal and a locked door...* Proxy *and* Brick were talking about it, and they said that you could tell me more."

"Oh..." Cal went silent a moment, and had stayed silent until he reached the couch he usually slept on. "...well, Natal and I were talking in her room and didn't want to be disturbed," Cal said.

"Talking about what?" Tails Doll inquired.

"Well, I liked her and she liked me," Cal said, lying down on the couch. "And we talked about how we could try to see each other more...that kind of stuff." He figured he wouldn't try to hide much from Tails Doll other than the "unnecessary details."

"Ooh..." Tails Doll said, as he nodded. *"...so, basically, you two got together?"*

"Yeah, pretty much," Cal said, looking up at the sky through the hole in the roof he made this morning after Brick's wake up call.

"...so, you only talked?" Tails Doll asked. *"Seems kind of weird for someone who just got together to just talk..."*

Cal sighed. "...I'm not gonna get into it tonight; I'm kinda tired," he said, turning over. "See you in the morning Tails Doll."

Nodding, Tails Doll began fluttering away. *"Good night, Uncle Cal..."*

"...night." he murmured.

I was lying in the middle of nowhere...in some dark void of nothingness. After a moment of realizing where I was, I suddenly felt a tremendous heat surround me. Opening my eyes, I saw that I was basked in flames. My first reaction would be to panic, but I slowly saw that the flame was not causing me pain. It was very warm, almost soothing for me.

"...you conquered your fears, just like I conquered mine."

I knew that voice, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it.

I felt myself pulled out of the flames, and when I rose, I saw someone I didn't expect to see, nor did I want to see. My eyes directly locked with another that were completely identical to mine. Only someone else could share the same eyes I had.

"...Callous," I gasped.

"...more like the part of you that's inside of her," it looked exactly like Callous, biker get-up and everything...but the way she looked at me was not a look of scorn or mockery. It was just a blank look; no, better yet...there was some softness in that look.

"The part of me...in her?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Wait a minute...what do you mean, you conquered your fear?" I asked again, intrigued by what she said.

"When Deity created Callous, it imparted some other fears you used to have into her..." she said. "Fear of being trapped, of losing your freedom...and the fear of your mother. When Callous confronted

Tails Doll...she conquered them."

"...my...mother?" I was bewildered, but the more I thought back, the more she was right...A long time ago when I was banished away my village the first time, I felt a tremendous grief. It made me realize that it wasn't the village I felt like I had let down when it happened...I felt like I had let down my mother, by letting the village that my dad said she loved so much be attacked and destroyed. I feared the day where I would see her in the heavens, and to see the disappointment on her face at what I failed to do...

What she said actually opened my eyes. I never really had those fears anymore when Callous came to the picture. I figured those fears went away when I had to face more important responsibility, but she was right.

"...I had no idea...you were in her," I said.

"I am your connection to her," the Callous look-alike answered. "I am the reason you feel...well..." and she turned aside, looking shameful.

"...oh..." After a minute, I set my hands on her shoulders. "...I'm sorry."

"...but no matter how much you want to deny it, she is a part of you," the Callous look-alike said, which prompted me to take my hands off her shoulders in more puzzlement at what she was referring to. "You've noticed it, haven't you? You each are becoming more like the other."

"...but...what does that mean?" I uttered.

The Callous look-alike took her turn to put her hands on my shoulders. "You have hated her ever since she has existed, but deep inside, you know its just the same of hating yourself." she said, as a sad look appeared on her face. "And it's so hard to face her...a whirlwind of confusing emotions are tied up in this whole thing; emotions that you're afraid to face...emotions that the both of us are afraid to face..."

"...why have to come to me?" I asked her, urging her to continue

even though she didn't necessarily answer my previous question.

"I came to advise you to open your heart," the Callous look-alike said. "When the time comes, don't push Callous away...welcome her..." and she closed her eyes again. "...just like you welcomed Metal."

With the dream ending there, Jill calmly opened her eyes. Then she sat up slowly, and stared down at the cold cave floor while thinking about what she had seen. *When the time comes?* she thought. *...what does she mean by that? And by welcoming Callous instead of pushing her away?*

"Mhrm..." she heard someone mumble behind her, this being Metal, who was still fast asleep, sitting with his back against the wall.

Seeing this, Jill smiled seeing Metal peacefully asleep. Then she stood up and walked toward the mouth of the cave. *...I guess I'll find out when the time comes,* she thought, leaning against the mouth to watch out on the horizon.

She had never thought about it that way; Callous being a part of her no matter how much she didn't want to think about it. It was scary, but when the truth sank in, she noticed that she wasn't so nervous for the battle anymore. Why it would comfort her, she didn't really know, seeing as this kind of news would only unnerve her more. But now, she really felt like she was ready for the battle to come.

And just in time too, for Jill saw the sun rising in the horizon that morning.

Even with the sun rising, Metal didn't wake up just yet, as he was still dozing off.

...this is different. Instead of a fog-filled forest, I found myself in Metropolis. Strange, that I'd find myself here. Specifically, this was the chamber where I and Jill encountered Eggman's spirit. But... why was I here?

"...stop denying it." I heard a familiar voice utter behind me. "Are you seriously going to ignore what you were built for?"

Hearing that voice, I instantly turned around, only to stand face-to-face with a character I wouldn't expect to see in any sort of reality.

Myself.

"...what..." I uttered, as I looked at this perfect replica of myself, whose arms were folded. "...what are you-"

"You heard me, you idiot." the copy said, as he shook his head. "Honestly, why are you staying with that girl, anyway? To see her defeat Callous?"

"...of course." I replied. "And after that, we take down Deity!"

"...yeah, right." the copy scoffed, as he shook his head. "I know you. After Callous, the next one to die will be Jill... by your hand."

"...what?" I uttered; the copy's words were bearing a striking resemblance to Deity's words. "What makes you think that I would do that?"

"I just know it." the copy shrugged. "I'm just waiting for you to get back to your senses... and do what your creator wanted you to do."

"...take over the world?" I uttered.

"Naturally." the copy said, before he began chuckling. "You can't deny it; you'll return to this room, and conquer the world like a good, little robot."

"You..." I uttered, but before I could finish my sentence, the room began distorting. "...what's going on?"

"...time to leave, it seems." the copy noted. "I'll be seeing you later."

Just then, Metal woke up, as he rubbed his head. *...what kind of dream was that?* he thought, as he shook his head, just when he noticed Jill by the mouth of the cave. *"...Jill."* he uttered.

Hearing him, Jill glanced back at him. "Good morning Metal," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"...I'm still surprised that I actually can sleep." Metal chuckled, as he stood up. *"How about you, Jill?"*

"I slept more decent than I have been..." Jill answered, looking back out at the sunrise outside.

"...that's good to know." Metal nodded, as he walked towards Jill. *"...a whole week's gone by..."* he mused.

"...I know," Jill murmured. "It went so quickly..."

"...and soon, it comes to and end." Metal hummed, before glancing at Jill. *"You're ready?"*

Jill gave Metal a nod. "I'm ready."

"Well... better not waste any time, then. They're probably waiting." Metal said, as he began heading out of the cave.

"Hold on," Jill said, turning back into the cave. Then she took out the canteen from her bag, and made sure it was empty. "Chaos!" she called.

The creature was there in mere minutes, and when Jill showed him the canteen, the creature sunk down into a puddle. She lowered the canteen mouth to the ground and the mutant puddle slithered right inside, just filling the canteen to the brim. Once she put a cap on it, she stowed it away on her person.

Having glanced back at Jill, Metal blinked. *"...why are you bringing him along?"* he inquired.

"Well, we were going to Angel Island, and I figured Chaos might want to come..." Jill said, shrugging. Then she remembered the sleeping Silver who was snoozing away. "...what about him?" she asked, pointing to the hedgehog.

"...leave him." Metal said with a shrug. *"We can tell him about what happened later, I suppose."*

Jill glanced at Silver once more, before she exited the mouth of the

cave and joined Metal outside. "Alright..." she said. "Well, since you hid the black emerald on the island, I'm guessing you'd know where it is."

"Indeed." Metal nodded, as he took hold of Jill's arm, before he began flying up in the air. *"Just hang on!"* Then, the two of them flew off, headed towards Angel Island, leaving the sleeping Silver on his own...

...or not. "Man, they really left, didn't they?" a female voice uttered. "Do you think they'll be alright?"

"Who knows, chica," a male voice answered. From the bushes aside, two figures came out; one of them being a toucan Spaniard with his rapier in holster beside his waist and the second being a spider-woman wearing quite thick clothing.

"...I j-just hope that they'll be safe." she said in a shy tone, as she glanced at the toucan. "E-especially Metal Sonic... he's been acting s-strangely for a while, now, right?"

"Yes, he has," the toucan murmured, rubbing his beak. "His kind of behavior is very different than when we last met." Then he glanced toward the cave. "They left their amigo behind too by the sound of it."

"Yeah, that was pretty weird, too..." the spider mused, as she rubbed her chin. "...ya think we oughta wake him up?" she added.

The toucan shrugged. "Why not?"

"Alright, lemme do it!" the spider giggled, as she tip-toed towards Silver, before she inhaled. Then... "WAKE UP, SLEEPY-HEAD!"

"HOLY MOTHER OF-" Silver didn't even finish; he was so startled that he was silenced when his head hit the rock wall. "Ow..." he growled, holding his head.

"He's awake," the toucan chuckled.

Silver opened his eyes when he heard that voice. He didn't expect at all to see these two characters. "...Huh?"

"...y-yeah... he's awake..." the spider nodded, as she slowly inched away from Silver. "...h-hi..." she said with a small wave to Silver.

"...uh, hi," Silver said. "Who are you two?"

"Me llamo Flamenco," the toucan introduced with a bow, to Silver's bewilderment.

"..your llamo what?"

"Aye..." Flamenco murmured, shaking his head. "It is Spanish, senor. My name is Flamenco, I said."

"...oooh," Silver responded.

"And I'm Marylin!" the spider suddenly shot in, as she grinned widely. "It's Lin, for short! It's really nice to meet you, mister!"

"...nice to meet you too I guess," Silver said. "My name's Silver the- wait a minute!" He suddenly stood up and looked around. "Where's Metal Sonic? Where's Jillian?"

"They said they were flying to an island of some kind," Flamenco answered.

"...they left without me?" Silver uttered in shock.

"...y-yeah." Lin nodded, as she quickly tried hiding behind Flamenco, in spite of the toucan being considerably shorter than her. "Th-they said that they'd t-tell you about what h-happened later..."

"...so they'll be back, huh?" Silver said, sitting back down. "...I'd hate to be left out, but I guess I have no choice but to wait for them." Then he looked back up at the two of them. "...and I guess I have only you guys for company, huh?"

"Si, senor Silver," Flamenco answered.

"Well, at least you won't be bored while you're with us!" Lin laughed, as she placed one of her left arms on her right side. "...or maybe you will. Who knows, really?"

"Yeah...who knows..." Silver murmured.

"...Proxy...hey, are you awake?"

Blinking, the android slowly sat up, as he rubbed his head. "...mmh... yes." he uttered. "Who's there...?"

Upon awakening, Proxy saw Milo standing by his side. "You awake now?" he asked.

"...yes." Proxy nodded, as he glanced at Milo. "...is something the matter?"

"...well, there's something I need to do and I need you for it," Milo said. "No one else is awake yet...so now is the time I need to do it."

"...what is it that you need to do?" Proxy inquired, as he tilted his head.

What would be unexpected for the android would be for Milo to put his hands on both sides of Proxy's head. "There's something you should know, Proxy," Milo said, opening his eyes to reveal that they were glowing; and eventually, his hands were glowing too.

Blinking, Proxy looked uneasily at Milo. "...what is it?" he inquired, though deep down, he felt that he didn't want to hear the answer.

"Inside of you, there's someone," Milo spoke. "Someone that needs to come out."

"...are you talking about... Shadow?" Proxy guessed.

Milo nodded, "Yes." Then he looked deeply at Proxy. "I don't want you to think that you're not important Proxy...that you were only here because of him...because you're still our friend too."

"...I understand." Proxy nodded, before he closed his eyes. "...am I going to see you guys again?"

"I promise you will," Milo assured. "Whether or not you may

remember what will happen in the next few hours, I don't know...but I promise that you'll see us again."

"...that's all I needed to know." Proxy nodded, before he smiled. "...go on, Milo."

Milo closed his eyes, and concentrated as his hold on Proxy tensed. It took awhile, and through Proxy's point of view, he eventually began to feel like he wanted to sleep again. *...this... probably won't take long...* Proxy thought, as his mind slowly faded away. *...as long as I'll see them again...*

After a while, the android opened his eyes, as he looked at Milo. "...it worked." he uttered.

The glow from Milo's eyes and hands faded away, but he didn't let go as he looked at the android. "...Shadow, is that really you?" he asked.

"...it is." the android nodded. "Thank you, Milo."

Milo smiled, and he got ahead of himself when he grabbed the android in a hug. "It's really good to see you again," he said.

"I could say the same to you." Shadow chuckled, as he returned the hug. "...I suppose I should apologize, for causing you all so much grief..."

"You don't have to apologize," Milo said. "But I'm not the worst to convince...you've got the others."

"...true." Shadow nodded, before he let go of Milo. "Though... I've been so busy keeping Proxy going, I've had no time to check up on Jill and Metal, or even Sonic and the others, for that matter. Do you think you could fill me in, Milo?"

"Sure," Milo said with another nod. "...some of it isn't good news though, but after a long night...I might know what to do about it..."

"...do indulge me." Shadow said with a nod.

Chapter 76

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-SIX

"How are you holding up?" Metal called, as he glanced at Jill, still carrying her as they flew across the sea.

"I'm doing alright," Jill answered. "And Chaos hasn't made a peep, so I guess he's good too."

"Glad to hear it." Metal said, as he looked ahead of him. *...alright, Callous... do your worst; I can handle it.* he thought. *"We're almost there."*

"Good to know," Jill said. While looking down at the ocean below, she felt anxious. While the battle was plenty enough to rile her up, the fact that Sonic and his friends wanted her to find the island only made her question what was going on...

Looking ahead, Metal blinked. *"...there it is."*

Indeed, the two were flying right the island, the stormy clouds still raging around it, thunder claps ringing across the sea, and green bolts of lightning shooting out from it from time to time. *"Angel Island..."* Metal uttered.

Just like my dream... Jill thought.

While closing in toward the storm, she got a weird feeling. She couldn't really describe it, but the more she looked at the storm, the more of this feeling she kept getting.

"...get ready, Jill. I don't feel like stopping." Metal said, as his arm began glowing with Purity, before he aimed it at the storm, letting loose a beam that pierced the storm. Just like when Goddess had done it, the area where the beam struck began collapsing, opening up a gaping hole which led into the island. Before Jill could question

it, Metal flew right into the hole. Though the unrelenting storm around them snapped at them, they were left unharmed thanks to the gap. Jill remained perfectly calm throughout this, even when they came out of the gap and into the island itself, with the storm that was going on inside. The two of them ended up grounding on one of the different pieces of small land that was simply floating there like stepping stones, leading two directions...

...and Jill's eyes were drawn toward the direction that pointed toward what looked like the eye of the storm.

Metal, too, glanced in that direction; the last time he was here, he had only dropped the capsule, not having spared a moment to enjoy the scenery that much. That aided in his fascination at the moment.

"...when we're done with the battle," Jill suddenly said. "...we need to go that way." She wasn't sure why, but her weird feeling brought her to say that. It was like the very beginning where she had sensed the emerald deep in that temple...some strange sense was pulling her toward the eye of the storm.

"...I see." Metal nodded, as he looked around him. *...alright, Callous...* he thought. *I know that you can hear me... so come out, already, and let's settle this.*

Then from out of the blue, "Yoo-hoo! Over here!"

Jill turned in the complete opposite direction the chunks of land went, which led to the island itself, and on a separate piece of land, two figures stood. One of them was waving, which could presumably have been Callous, while the other one simply stood next to her with folded arms; likely, Johnny.

"...hm. They actually waited for us." Metal scoffed, before he gave Jill a nod. *"It's time to put that training to the test."*

"Yeah," And she went ahead hopping each piece of land until she made it to the piece that Johnny and Callous stood on.

"Took you two long enough," Callous chuckled; and according to Jill, she seemed awfully cheerful.

"Well, unlike you two, we decided to take the scenic route." Metal said, as he floated next to Jill, keeping an eye on the two. *"How did you manage to get in here?"*

"Two words, tin can; Chaos Control." Johnny chuckled, as he tapped his finger against the steel compartment on his chest. "If he wasn't dead, I'd have thanked Colonel Reeds for making a Chaos Emerald my replacement heart... before I'd kill him, myself."

"So he brought you back to life with a Chaos Emerald?" Jill asked, and closed her eyes afterward. *That explains why I saw them when I looked through that emerald,* she thought.

"That, he did." Johnny nodded. "But with the Chaos Emeralds hidden all over the world, there really was no way to bring me back... until they were gathered and split apart a few weeks ago."

Hearing that, Metal glanced at Jill, recalling their first battle. *...so, when she sent them away... they could revive him...* he thought.

"In any case, the Chaos Emerald is actually what's keeping me alive." Johnny chuckled. "And I intend to live for a long time after we're done here."

"...so if the emerald was torn from your body..." Metal began, as he looked at Johnny. *"...you'd die."*

"Bingo." Johnny nodded. "But it's not like I'll give you two the chance to get it out of me, anyway."

"...uh-huh," Jill muttered in complete doubt.

"Well, shall we start?" Callous said with a smirk.

"...why not?" Jill answered.

In a millisecond the two girls charged at each other, and the fight was on. They began by throwing punches and kicks at each other, all of which were blocked by the other. It immediately was obvious that the two were matched, but neither was going to stop there at all.

"Now THIS is gonna be a show!" Johnny laughed, as he quickly sat down, watching the two ewes fight like that. "Go on, Metal; sit down! Enjoy the ride!"

"...I'll withhold enthusiasm until the battle is finished." Metal responded coldly, as he sat down next to Johnny, watching Jill and Callous fight. *You can take her, Jill...*

Jill worked around Callous to get behind her, and grabbed her. Callous took the arm that grabbed her and threw Jill over, and flew after her to kick her back, but Jill flipped over and surprised her by grabbing the foot she was about to kick with. Then she finally landed a kick to Callous' face, knocking the wench away a distance.

"You got the first hit," Callous chuckled, rubbing her face. "Good for you." She charged after Jill, and started throwing punches again, and Jill blocked them.

Callous eventually grew tired of this, so she summoned up her whips, and stepped back in order to whip Jill, although remembering her training, she stood in a balanced stance and started batting away the whips without fear. For awhile this went on, and Callous was getting irritated. She threw the whip around Jill's waist and threw her up in the air, taking that moment to switch from her whips to her scythe, and she leaped up after her counterpart to slice her up.

"Yes!" Johnny laughed, as he clapped his hands together. "Finish her, Callous!"

Metal, however, was silent, as he kept watching Jill. *Counter it!* he thought.

On the free fall, Jill spun right around just as Callous was about to strike, and blocked it with her own sword. It seemed she was fast enough to keep up, and she shoved Callous back down onto the ground, while Jill kept falling and readied a strike on Callous when she landed. Callous rolled out of the way and let Jill hit the ground instead, and Callous took the opportunity to try and slash at Jill from behind; Jill only blocking it again with her blade.

"You're good," Callous chuckled.

"Less talking, more fighting," Jill grunted, as she whacked the scythe away with her sword and charged at Callous again, with the wicked girl using the staff as a block herself.

...take advantage of every opening, Jill... Metal thought, ignoring the cheers coming from Johnny. *...don't let up your offense for a second!*

With another step back, Callous conjured up Corruption around the blade of her scythe and she charged more brutally this time, making Jill back up as she tried to block the blows as best as she could. Callous even faked a swipe to make another from a different direction, and Jill fell for it, having the Corruption coated scythe slice her shoulder.

Jill pulled back, clutching the bleeding cut on her shoulder in some agony.

"Ha, I finally landed a hit on you," Callous chuckled.

"That's my girl!" Johnny laughed, as he pumped his fists into the air. "Deliver the final blow, already!"

...keep your guard up, Jill... Metal thought, as he folded his arms. *...one moment of weakness could be the end of it!*

Jill let go of the cut, showing a burn mark on the cut she got, and after summoning Purity energy around her blade, she charged back at Callous. Now Callous was the one that had to back up while blocking the blows. Eventually Jill broke through a block, and she managed to cut Callous across the face barely by the tip of her blade. Callous screamed while she held her face.

"Just shut up Callous," Jill said.

"...that's my girl." Metal chuckled. *Don't let up, Jill. Strike her again!*

Callous took her hand off her face, and while the cut was bleeding, there was a pale, almost white mark across her face; probably the result of Purity. The witch glared at her other half. She abandoned

her scythe altogether and channeled all the Corruption to her hands, to lash out at Jill with. Jill tried to use her arms to block, but Callous managed to get more hits on her, giving more dark burned marks on the poor girl. Jill blocked lastly with a Purity coated arm, and like Callous, channeled the Purity to her hands as she attacked Callous. Both girls blocked, but both girls suffered under the opposite energies, for just as fast Jill got burn marks, Callous got more of those pale white marks.

"...kkh..." Johnny uttered, as he folded his arms. "Come on, you can take her, Callous!"

...hang in there, Jill. Metal thought, looking intently at Jill.

Finally both of them quit that, and taking a step back, Jill had to catch her breath, while Callous winced at the pain she felt. However, she smirked at how tired Jill already was. "I guess you don't have as much energy as you used to," she sneered.

"Shut...up..." Jill huffed. Now aught to be the time to bring out the big guns, so Jill closed her eyes, and concentrated. She was whisked up in the air by the air itself, and that cocoon of white light swirled around her, consuming her. When the cocoon was gone, it showed Jill in her Holy form, spreading out her wings proudly.

Here in the darkness of the storm around Angel Island, she glowed even brighter than she usually did.

"Tsch... that's blinding..." Johnny complained, as he had to shield his eyes from the immense glow Jill was emitting.

Metal, however, simply looked at Jill. *...good girl* . he thought. *You can do it.*

This was truly the first time Callous really saw this form, and Jill had never been able to transform so easily to use against her, but it still didn't impress her. "How cute, you look even more like the angel you portray yourself as," she chuckled, getting a glare from Jill. "Oh, there's that sour look again."

"Are you going to use this fight to mock me, or are you going to

fight?" the white being questioned her, as she coated a fist with Purity and lunged at Callous with a punch to the face.

That made her fly far with a loud scream, hitting the ground in a hard roll. Bringing up her face, half of it was covered with a fist-like pale marking, and she glared back at her. "Fine, I'll fight," she growled, taking out her scythe to use against Jill.

"...heh." Metal chuckled. *"Looks like this won't be as one-sided as you two hoped for..."* he said, which made Johnny cast a glare at him.

"...tsch..." Johnny scoffed, before looking at Callous. "Hey, Callous! Why don't you show Jill who the strongest really is? Go all out!"

No matter how she swung her scythe, Jill effortlessly blocked it with her blade, which was glowing as brightly as she was right now. With the added measure of flight, Jill quickly swerved behind Callous and swiped at her back, making her cry out in pain again. When Callous swung around to kick again, Jill simply grabbed the foot and pulled her over her head to slam her onto the ground, hard.

Callous used her other foot to kick Jill's face, and when it hit, it freed her first foot as Jill staggered back. Getting back up, Callous ran at Jill again, but Jill took her hand and slapped her across the face extremely hard, causing her to hit the ground again.

"Now it seems one sided," Jill remarked, not having heard Metal say something similar to that. *"What's the matter Callous? Where's your enthusiasm?"*

"Whatever happened to shutting up?" Callous retorted, getting back up in a huff.

Again, she tried running at Jill, but Jill simply soared over her and delivered a kick to her back, knocking her down again. Then when Callous was on the ground, Jill pounced her and started to punch her face, over, and over, and over, and over again. She knocked her face back and forth endlessly, and Jill realized a new found rage that had bubbled up inside of her, directed at Callous. *"This is for trying to hurt my friends!"* she yelled, throwing another punch to her face.

"This is for making me sick!" Another punch. *"This is for what you did to my mother!"* Another punch again. *"This...this is for the torture you put me through!"* this last punch was pretty hard.

Now, it was Metal's turn to laugh. *"Good riddance! This is a comedy goldmine, all of a sudden!"*

"...kkh..." Johnny growled, as he shot a glare at Metal. "...and your little secrets aren't?"

Before Jill could throw another punch, an overwhelming force of Corruption knocked her away, causing her an unreal pain as Callous slowly rose to her feet.

"It's all about you, isn't it?" Callous growled, and as Jill and the other two boys noticed, her voice had grown more demented. *"Do you even realize how selfish you sound? It really is starting to get on my nerves."*

Jill quickly got back up, noticing the dark aura that Callous gained.

"You want to know what my *frustration of this whole deal is?"* Callous asked. *"DO YOU?"* Something was trying to break out of her back, and it tore up her biker jacket as a pair of wings splattered out with black goo, growing and opening up for Jill to see.

Seeing that, Metal's laughter subsided. *"...what..."*

"What, did you think that Jill was the only one with a form like that?" Johnny said mockingly, as he grinned. "Think, you idiot. If they're exact opposites... then wouldn't Callous have a form to counter that holy form of Jill's? An unholy form, you could call it..."

"...what?" Jill uttered in disbelief. Was this really what Johnny said it was? The moment she saw darkness creep up Callous, and surround her...like a cocoon...she knew.

When the darkness shrank away, she saw that horrifying black figure, created in the likeness of her Holy form but on the opposite side of the scale. Those long demonic wings were much bigger than her own wings, and Callous looked back up at her despised counterpart with piercing eyes, covered with red.

That got a single shudder out of Jill.

"Alright!" Johnny laughed, as he clapped his hands together. "Go get her, Callous!"

Growling, Metal clenched his hands together. *"...don't let yourself become intimidated, Jill! Remember your training, and strike her down!"* he called.

Jill was about to answer back to Metal, but she was interrupted.

"This...is for how annoying you are!" the dark creature spoke, jumping forward with a dark red Corruption-coated fist, and slamming it through Jill's cheek, making her cry out as the white being flew backwards. It was her turn to take a hard roll on the ground, and while shakily trying to get up, the others saw the same strange markings that had grown from her hand all around her chest, on her cheek, where Callous had punched.

It burned still, and Jill winced as she rubbed her cheek.

Seeing that, Metal's eyes widened. *"...no, no, get up!"* he called. *"You can handle it, Jill! Get up, and strike her down!"*

"Trying to cheer her on, Metal?" Johnny laughed, as he glanced at the Metallix with a smirk. "It's not gonna work."

"You know what I really fight for, you selfish, spoiled little bitch?" Callous snarled. *"I fight for my own freedom!"* With a flap of her wings, she lunged at Jill again, and Jill quickly took flight into the air just to get away from her; however, Callous simply followed in flight as well. Then Callous' anger turned into amusement, and she started to chuckle. *"Now I've got you on the run..."*

"You know, you're not so innocent Callous!" Jill yelled back, as she threw beams of Purity at her pursuer. *"Just because you want freedom, doesn't mean you deserve it!"*

"So?" Callous grunted apathetically, looping around the beams of Purity. Then she smirked. *"I still think that you have a piece of soul that belongs to me..."*

Jill suddenly caught on what happened. *Did...my personality push through her when she said she was fighting for her freedom?* She thought, though her thoughts were broken as Callous had thrown beams of dark red Corruption at her. Jill flew away, trying to avoid them as Callous continued to chase her and throw Corruption at her. As Jill kept avoiding them, she tried throwing Purity back to try and stop her.

"...this is getting too close..." Metal muttered, as he was completely on edge. *...what's going on? Why won't she strike her down? Wasn't this what I trained her for?*

For awhile, this is how it went, as beams of Corruption and Purity were flung back and forth in the air, and the two flew in numerous circles while the chase proceeded on.

Finally, a hit was made, and Jill cried out, as she started to fall. Callous dove down and grabbed Jill, flying downwards to make the fall faster, and as this went on, the two of them lashed again at each other madly. Finally, just as they would hit the ground, Jill grabbed Callous and turned her over, making her hit the ground face-first and take the portion of the fall. Callous faced Jill while she was on the ground, and kicked her off, then jumped back up in flight to lunge at Jill with her claw-like nails. Jill grabbed her wrist, and stopped her, and when Callous tried with the other hand, Jill caught that too. That made two begin a power struggle against each other.

"...Jill!" Metal suddenly called. *"You can beat her! Put all your might into this!"*

Johnny, however, only smirked, as he watched the power struggle. *...take her down, Callous.*

Finally Callous' strength was overtaking her as she pushed her wrists farther past Jill's reach, and made her panic. *I've got to do something...random!* she thought. Opening her mouth, something suddenly started generating like a ball of Purity.

This came out of the blue for Callous as she could only watch in questioning. *"Huh?"*

Then it blasted out and struck Callous right in the face, shooting her away from Jill and making her hit the ground.

Blinking, Johnny tilted his head. "...she could do that?" he uttered, as he glanced at Metal.

"...I didn't know she could until now..." Metal muttered, before he closed his eyes. *...but she got out of it...*

Callous eventually got back up, but she dusted herself off like nothing. Jill, meanwhile, still had to catch her breath. Noticing that she was running out of steam, Callous smirked. *"Need a break?"*

"Don't be...stupid..." Jill huffed. But in honesty, she could hardly move. It was getting harder and harder to breathe for some reason, and her arms and chest were aching sorely.

Metal blinked, as he watched Jill. *"...why is she..."* he uttered.

"My, my..." Johnny chuckled. "...doesn't look like your training did a whole lot, rust-bucket."

"Put a sock in it Johnny, " Jill said, without even looking at Johnny. *"Besides, you were the one that was killed by an 8 year old; I wouldn't call me weak if I were you."* Trying to ignore her aches, she took out her sword and charged at Callous again, but it looked like she had slowed down a bit.

Callous jumped aside, and kicked behind Jill, launching her toward the edge of the chunk of land and just barely stopping before she fell over.

Johnny frowned, as he folded his arms. "...I had been stabbed in the heart before that damn snake got me..." he muttered, looking away. "...and he was 6..."

In the meantime, Metal kept watching Jill with increasing worry. *...what's going on? Why is she losing stamina?*

Jill tried to get up but Callous made it to her in time to take her by the throat and pick her up, holding her over the edge. *"How pitiful, I expected more from you,"* Callous said.

Jill suddenly snatched Callous by the arm. *"I want you to SHUT YOUR F*CKING MOUTH, CALLOUS!"* And digging her fingers into her arm, jolted Purity energy into the arm making Callous screech, and throw Jill the other way back toward the middle of the land.

"Who-HOAH!" Johnny laughed. "Such language! Metal, what are you teaching your students?" he said in a sarcastic tone, shooting Metal a glance.

"Be silent. " Metal uttered, as he looked back at Jill. *...don't lose focus...*

Jill got back up again, and Callous took out one of her whips, lashing Jill across the face and knocking her down to the ground again. But Jill simply got back up; shakily though.

"...You'll just keep getting back up, won't you? " Callous said.

"Of course...I will," Jill panted.

"...you can do it, Jill..." Metal muttered.

Just then, Johnny sighed. "As much as I enjoy seeing her get smacked down all the time... it's not gonna be satisfying. Callous, fire it up!"

Just then, Metal shot Johnny a glance. *...no, don't tell me that-*

Callous shrugged. *"I guess it's all we can do now."* From her person, she reached and pulled out something, showing it to Jill which she could see was a tiny figurine that looked like Metal for some reason.

And that made her nervous. *"W...what is that?"* she uttered.

"Watch and see," Callous chuckled. While squeezing the figurine, her hand became coated with red Corruption energy, and started to seep into the figurine.

Originally, Metal had planned on simply enduring that trick for as long as possible; seeing as he had been subjected to it before, he figured that he could put up with it.

This, however, felt on par with Deity's Corruption.

Unable to hold it in, Metal let out a cry as he clutched at his chest, before collapsing, writhing in sheer pain.

This scared Jill nearly to death, and she clasped her hands over her mouth in horror, as Callous laughed. *"...what are you doing to him?"* Jill questioned, turning to the black witch who smirked wickedly.

"It's a little toy he gave to me, just before I snatched that black emerald from the GUN base," Callous chuckled. *"But it's acted as the perfect voodoo doll!"* Again, she injected more Corruption into the figurine.

Metal let out another shriek of pain, as he began thrashing wildly about, the pain simply too much for him to handle.

Seeing that, Johnny laughed. "And you know the best part about it, Jill?" he said, as he glanced at the ewe. "For several days, now... without you knowing..."

Just then, Metal shot Johnny a glare. *"D-don't... you... DARE!"* he yelled, though that caused him to lapse back in pain.

Hearing that, Johnny chuckled. "Oh, you don't want me to say it?" he said, before glancing at Jill. "Then why not tell her, yourself?"

"...Metal, what are they talking about?" Jill uttered, scared even more.

Breathing heavily, Metal looked away from Jill. *"...I... suppose there's no hiding it, anymore...* " he uttered, before wincing in pain. *"...it began the same day that Ani attacked the camp..."*

"Hurry it up, will you?" Johnny chuckled, as he folded his arms. "I need to see her reaction!"

Shooting Johnny a glare, Metal eventually closed his eyes. *"...I didn't know that she could do something like this... but using that figurine... she's invaded my mind... and been able to inflict pain upon me... as she is now..."*

Jill's eyes widened, and realized the veracity of what he said by recalling the times he had acted strange or unresponsive to her. *"...all this time...she was doing those things to you?"* she uttered. *"...and you kept it from me?"*

"That's right, honey," Callous chuckled again.

Jill trembled while she stared at Metal...and eventually, tears rolled down her cheeks.

That was enough to cause Johnny to start laughing loudly. "YES! This is priceless!" he cackled.

"...J-Jill..." Metal uttered, as he looked weakly at her. *"D-don't get the wrong idea..."* Just then, holding in the pain that was seeping into his body, he began to slowly push himself upwards. *"For the past week... I've gotten to know you well... and if it's one thing I'm certain of... is that you're a huge worry-wart..."*

Seeing Metal slowly climb to his feet, Johnny stopped laughing, as he watched the Metallix. "...well, now..."

"...if I had let you know about it..." Metal continued, as he tried to push himself up on his feet. *"...you'd be too unfocused to fight against her..."* Just then, he looked up at Jill. *"...and there's too much at stake... for you to lose focus... Jill!"*

"You know, I'm tired of hearing you talk," Callous said, digging her nails into the figurine now to add to the pain that the Corruption was giving Metal. " *I'd rather hear you SCREAM!"*

However, there came no scream. While his entire body tensed, Metal was doing his very best to stay strong, as he kept glaring at Jill. *"...listen..."* he began, as he clenched his hands into fists. *"...I originally went into this... as a means to be rid of Callous..."*

"...no way..." Johnny uttered, as he saw just how determined Metal was to keep himself composed. "...he's got some guts."

"...however... " Metal continued. *"...I know what's at stake... because*

if you fall... there won't be anyone who can stop Callous... from doing as she pleases..." Just then, Metal winced in pain. " *...think...! If you fall... then what of your friends...?"*

Jill was torn. What he said was true, but throughout the entire week she trained with Metal, she had grown close to him, even closer than she realized. While she couldn't believe he had hid all that stuff from her, the last thing she ever wanted to do was to put him through more hell like that; but she also promised Metal that no matter what, she wouldn't forfeit the match. Eventually she came to a choice that she never, ever wanted to resort to.

Metal very well couldn't carry it out now.

"...let him go...Callous," Jill sputtered, bringing up her blade. *"...or I'm taking the two of us down right here, right now."* Jill then directed her blade...at her own chest, threatening to impale herself. *"...if one dies, so does the other, right Callous?"* Jill reminded, illustrating what she would do.

Callous' smirk fell, and for a minute, she was silent. Would Jill actually do that?

However, Johnny simply scoffed. "She's bluffing! Finish him off, Callous!" he yelled.

Metal, however, was stunned. *"...you..."* he uttered. *"...you fool! What do you think you're doing?"* Seeing that, he began walking towards Jill, as if the pain from the Corruption was subsiding. *"Are... are you going to sacrifice yourself... just to save me?"* he yelled, as he jammed his eyes shut. *"ARE YOU GOING TO LET A* KILLING MACHINE *LIVE... AT THE COST OF NEVER SEEING YOUR FRIENDS AGAIN?"*

Callous finally smirked again. Then she started to laugh, and it grew. *"Relax Metal; she probably IS bluffing!"* she she summoned up an even more dangerous amount of Corruption to the figurine in hopes of finally shutting up Metal.

As Callous laughed, it was Jill's turn to be silent for a minute.

This time, Metal screamed, as he sank to his knees. However, in spite of that, he still advanced towards Jill, glaring at her. *"...Jill..."* he uttered, his body starting to tear from the intense amount of Corruption within his body. *"...y-you can still take her out..."* Then, he glared at Callous. *"...she's completely open! For... FORGET ABOUT ME... AND JUST DEFEAT HER!"*

More tears came down from Jill's eyes, as she shut them tightly. She had to do it...she couldn't bear seeing Metal like this.

Callous suddenly felt an unbelievable pain in her chest and she stopped laughing. When she went to clutch her chest, she felt something wet run out, and when she took a look at her hand, she saw blood. Her hand trembled at this sight, because Callous never bled, and she looked up in total disbelief at what happened.

Jill...like she said she would...stabbed herself.

Like Callous, blood came from her impaled chest where her sword ran through and from her mouth, some blood trickled as well; something that also started happening to Callous. Both could scarcely breathe with the blood forced out through their throats, and both were slowly losing strength. Callous dropped the Metal figurine, and the black goo oozed out of that thing as it returned to normal; freeing Metal completely from its control.

Both were even reverting to their normal forms too; Callous' demonic wings turned into mere black goo and melted off her back into puddles on the ground, and the light all around Jill was withering away in shimmers, revealing a gravely injured ewe underneath both of them.

Once they finished reverting, both of them eventually collapsed to the ground; with the blade still through Jill.

Seeing Callous collapse, Johnny was more or less startled. "...C-Callous?" he uttered. "...h-hey, stop joking around! Come on, get up, already!"

Seeing Jill collapse, however, even though he was free from Callous' control... that brought an even greater pain to the Metallix,

than Deity and Callous ever had put him through. *"...J-Jill..."* he uttered, as he got on his feet. *"...Jill..."* Quickly, he began running towards the ewe.

Jill at least had enough strength to yank back out her sword, but the wound remained, since she firmly refused to heal it. Callous rolled to face the sky from where she was lying on the ground, and had felt the extra pain from Jill pulling the sword out of herself.

"...Callous!" Johnny yelled, as he began running towards her, an honestly worried look on his face. "Come on, this isn't funny anymore! Get up, and take out both of them!"

Just then, Metal skidded to a halt next to Jill's body, kneeling by her. *"...Jill... you fool..."* he uttered, as he was now on the verge of tears. *"...you went ahead and broke our promise, you..."* Unable to see Jill like that, he shut his eyes, placing his hand on Jill's.

Jill coughed up blood, before she could answer him. "...I didn't break...my promise," she uttered. "...I beat her...I made sure that...she wouldn't..." and she coughed again.

"...heal yourself..." Callous suddenly yelled. She clenched her fist and turned her head to Jill. "HEAL YOURSELF DAMN IT!"

"...no..." Jill croaked.

"Callous, don't strain yourself!" Quickly, Johnny knelt by Callous. "Hang in there; you can handle this!"

"...that's not the promise I was talking about..." Metal uttered, as he turned his head away from Jill. *"...you promised... that you'd only let me kill you..."*

Jill slowly reached with her other hand and touched Metal's arm. "...I wouldn't...have been able...to keep both promises...in that situation."

When Jill said that, however, Metal suddenly glared back at her, unable to hold back his tears anymore. *"...do you even realize what you're doing...?"* he uttered. *"...this is... the second time I've been*

robbed of my victory... do you even know what it feels like? You were my goal! What do I have left now?"

Jill was crying too. "...I'm so sorry...it's just that I..."

Callous also reached with her hand to touch Johnny, and while digging her fingers in, spiritual energy came from her arm and began trailing into Johnny. "...just so...they don't go...to waste," she uttered to him.

"...Callous..." Johnny uttered, as he slowly moved his hand towards Callous' cheek. "...what're you saying? You're not gonna let this kill you... are you?"

Callous sighed, putting her other hand to Johnny's hand on her cheek. "...I can't do anything about it. If she wants to die...then I'm coming along with her."

"...n-no..." Johnny uttered; for once in his life, he actually seemed distraught. "...no! No, you can't allow that! You're the superior twin, aren't you? You can take her!"

Looking at Jill, one could almost tell that Metal was trying to hold back his tears. *"...you didn't have to do this..."* he uttered. *"...how could I possibly be worth more... than all of your friends...?"*

"...Metal..." Jill spoke, coughing blood afterward. "...you're my friend...too..."

"...Johnny," Callous said, as it seemed that she was on her very last breath as well. "...I'll miss you."

The minute Jill's hand fell from Metal's arm, so did Callous' arm that was sending in the spirits into Johnny. To their touch, both ewe's immediately became stone cold and still. Jillian and Callous were finally dead.

Looking down at Jill's body, Metal could only stare for a few moments, as the reality of it all collapsed around him. Deity's prediction had come true... Jill was no longer among the living...

...he had failed.

With this realization, Metal buried his face into Jill's body, as he wept, harder than he had ever wept before.

Johnny, however, was still looking down at Callous with a devistated look. "...Callous..." he uttered, as he took her limp arm in his shaky arms, looking down at them. *...this wasn't supposed to happen... we were gonna win! How? Why?* he thought, as he was almost completely lost in despair.

As he thought this, however, his gaze trailed towards Jill and Metal, just as something dawned on him. *Metal Sonic... you're the reason she...* he thought, as his despair slowly turned into anger, and that, in turn, turned into hate.

At that point, he realized it; he despised Metal Sonic.

"...YOU F*CKER!" With a deafening yell, Johnny leaped right towards Metal, and with the Metallix already too distraught to notice him, the lion gave the machine a fierce kick, that knocked him away from Jill. "THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT! IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR YOU, CALLOUS WOULD STILL BE ALIVE!" he yelled, with unbelievable fury ringing in his voice.

Metal, however, neither responded or moved, as he simply looked up at the sky, tears dropping from his eyes.

Throughout all this, no one even remembered one little detail...in Jill's pocket, the canteen began to leak out with water, and soon, all of the water within had broken off the cap and slithered down onto the ground, slowly beginning to take it's shape next to Jill.

Seeing that, Johnny frowned. "...what? What kinda goddamn tricks did you bring with you!" he yelled, as he glared at Metal, who was still lying completely unresponsive on the ground. "...sh*t! I knew we should have killed you while we had the chance!"

When he said that, however, his gaze moved towards Callous' body, or more specifically, something close-by it; the Metal figurine. Growling, he made a wild dash towards it, before snatching it, his hands burning with Corruption. "...I dunno where robots go to die... but I hope that you burn in the lowest pits of hell!" he yelled, as he

tried forcing as much Corruption into it as possible.

Metal, even as his body was being consumed by dark flames, still lied on the ground, his gaze now directed at Jill. Even with the flames surrounding him, the tragedy of losing Jill... compared to that, the torture was nothing.

It was more like a wake-up call.

Thinking that, all of a sudden, the dark flames were whisked away, and a dark-green glow began surrounding Metal's entire body, glowing brilliantly.

"What?" Johnny uttered, as when Metal's body began glowing with Unity, so did the figurine. "Wha- what's going-" In that instant, the figurine suddenly exploded, burning Johnny's hand with searing Unity energy, causing him to yell in pain.

Once the water formed itself to be Chaos the God of Destruction, he looked around. First, his eyes fell upon the dead ewes in surprise, and then he noticed the scene going on with Metal and Johnny.

Holding his burnt hand in surprise, Johnny glared at Metal, who was actually standing up, whilst Unity flared around his entire body. "...damn... don't think that this is the end of it!" he yelled, just as he warped away, leaving two objects to drop to the ground where he once stood; a red and a blue gem.

Seeing Johnny flee, the Unity faded away around Metal as he was breathing heavily, before he looked towards Jill's body.

Chaos only stared at Metal, wondering just what he missed.

"...Chaos..." Metal uttered, as he slowly approached Jill's body, kneeling by her. *"...my reason for existing just passed away... what am I to do, now...?"*

Because the creature couldn't speak, he could not reply. Chaos only glanced to see the Chaos Emeralds lying on the ground, and went to pick them up, bringing them with him back to Metal and Jill.

Still, Metal only looked down at Jill's body. *"...one thing's for sure... I*

can't let anyone know of this..." As he said this, he searched Jill's body, before he found the white Chaos Emerald. Nodding, he stood up, before looking at Chaos. *"...I'll probably need the emeralds... so can you stay here... and watch over her...?"*

Chaos nodded.

"...thank you..." Metal uttered, as he took the two Chaos Emeralds from the water creature, before looking away. *"...I'm sorry... I just can't bear to look at her... I need to leave."* Then, he warped away.

Chaos looked at Jill, and then at Callous. Eventually, he brought himself to not only pick up Jill's body, but Callous' body as well. Then the creature walked off to find a safe place to reside for the moment.

Chapter 77

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-SEVEN

If one were to go anywhere close to Metropolis, one would hear the maddened, and yet anguished cries from a certain Metallix, along with tremendous explosions ringing through the city.

Marching through the halls of this tower, Metal was going through a flux of emotions at the same time, anger and sadness being the prevalent ones. *"Why..."* he uttered, his voice sounding like he was on the verge of breaking down once more. *"Why, why, why, why, WHY?"*

"...Metal..." a voice uttered suddenly, coming from within Metal's head.

However, even hearing that didn't calm Metal down, as he kept stomping through the tower. *"...what?"* he spat. *"What the hell do you want, Sonic?"*

"...she's still alright," Sonic spoke.

That, however, did absolutely nothing to quell Metal's rage. In fact, it fueled it, as he stopped to slam his hand furiously into the wall of the hallway. *"ARE YOU BLIND, SONIC?"* he yelled. *"SHE'S NOT ALRIGHT, YOU INCONSIDERATE PRICK! SHE'S DEAD! CEASED TO BE! AND IT'S ALL MY FAULT!"* After that outburst, Metal began running through the hallway.

"I meant her soul, Metal!" Sonic continued. *"Her soul is safe!"*

Even though Sonic tried pleading with him, the Metallix simply wouldn't listen. *"What difference does that make? You can converse with her whenever you feel like it, but it doesn't change the fact that she's dead!"* Just as he said that, he burst into a familiar chamber; namely, the one Eggman's spirit had resided in. *"...face it, Sonic..."* he uttered, as he stumbled into the room. *"...we've lost."*

"Not according to Milo Hawk-Feather and Shadow, " Sonic said. *"Metal, there's still a way to turn this totally around!"*

"How? How are we possibly supposed to turn this in our favor?" Metal yelled, as he sat down by a computer console. *"We've lost Knuckles ... Goddess... and now Jill... I don't see how you can spot even a glimmer of hope on the horizon..."* As he spoke, he gently slammed his head against the keyboard, before he began sobbing.

The voice was only silent now, allowing Metal to sob for awhile until, *"...were you really THAT bent on killing her yourself?"*

"...it's not like I could rely on you, could I?" Metal uttered, as he raised his head away from the keyboard. *"...what good would taking over the world be... if there isn't anyone capable of challenging me...?"* As he uttered this, he placed his hand on the keyboard; when he did that, however, a screen turned on, letting Metal see something he had nearly forgotten about.

A password prompt, for Eggman's restricted files.

"...are you freaking serious?" Sonic suddenly barked. *"Metal, she put so much faith in you; heck, more faith in you than anyone EVER would have! She even sacrificed her life for you, and like you said, risked never being able to see her friends again! What kind of jerk are you?"*

In that instant, Metal slammed his hands down on the computer. *"SHUT UP!"* he yelled, with such force that it rang through all of the city. *"...do you not think... that I feel guilty about this?"*

"No, I DON'T think you feel that guilty about it!" Sonic yelled again. " *You're ranting on about how you failed to destroy your challenger for the second time! Is that really what you were so worked over about? You don't even consider the good things she tried to show you?"*

This time, however, Metal didn't reply, as he closed his eyes. *"...you're... mistaken..."* he uttered. *"...it wasn't only about killing her... but..."*

"'But' what, Metal?" Sonic asked sternly.

"...Sonic." Metal uttered, as he looked at the screen, the password prompt still there. *"...when Rouge died... what did you feel...?"*

"...I felt pretty miserable..." Sonic murmured. *"And extremely angry too..."*

"...I see..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...all the times you've struck me down... every single moment I've been subjected to the torturous touch of Corruption... and yet, Jill's death has wounded me infinitely more than all of those painful moments combined..."*

"Why do you think that is, Metal?" Sonic questioned.

"...I have a few people to blame for that..." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...I blame Light Gaia and Dark Gaia; those responsible for the creation of Purity and Corruption . I blame Eggman, for implanting me with the data that reacts so much to Purity and Corruption. I blame myself, for uniting those two forces, and causing an even stronger reaction... and I blame Jill... for being so friendly towards me..."*

Sonic kept silent.

"...my apologies, but... we're not getting anywhere, here." Metal eventually said, just as he looked back at the password prompt. *"...I have to wonder..."*

As if he was bewitched, he slowly began typing out the seven-letter password his creator had imparted on him before his demise, watching the dots appear on the screen as he typed. *"...R...E...V...E...N...G...E."* After that, his finger hovered above the Enter-button, as the Metallix still eyed the screen; he could swear that he heard a heartbeat.

Metal just heard a yawn in his head, which came from Sonic.

"...hmph." With that, he pressed the Enter key.

The instant he did that, three documents sprung up on the screen, each of them detailing one invention from Eggman; inventions never before seen, until this moment. *"...interesting..."*

"You know, I still think it was a dumb password..." grumbled Sonic.

"...I agree..." Metal muttered. *"...but this... could prove to be useful."* Then, he turned the computer off, before turning towards the door. *"...if I fight alone... then I'll need to prepare."*

In a deserted cave, somewhere, a certain lion was sitting on his own, a maddened look in his eyes, as he glared at his right hand; burns still visible on its surface. *...damn it all...* he thought, before clenching that hand. *...why did you have to die, Callous...?*

" Such a shame, isn't it?" a voice spoke calmly, coming from behind Johnny.

Blinking, Johnny looked up from his hand. "...Deity? Where are you hiding?" he said, as he quickly got back on his feet, looking around him.

And shortly after, the bat himself walked out of a dark corner in the cave. Johnny certainly noticed that he had looked considerably different than the last time he saw the vampire, with his black leathers and his cut hair; thankfully a more modern look. "Interesting," he murmured. "I never thought you were so close to her."

Johnny only looked at Deity for a while, once more feeling intimidated by the bat's presence... but then he smirked. "...good timing..." he uttered. "...you're the one who created Callous... so you can just bring her back! Man, I was pretty worried there, for a moment..."

"I don't intend to bring her back, Johnny," Deity spoke, stopping Johnny right there.

Hearing that, Johnny blinked, as he looked at Deity with a shocked expression. "...wh-why not?" he uttered.

"While Callous was very successful tormenting Jillian, I did not trust her," Deity said. "I knew she would try to plot my undoing, so

bringing her back would only be unnecessary trouble for me. Since it managed to put an ending to Jillian's life, and it rid Callous of my responsibility, I will leave it at that, and continue with my own business."

"...you..." Johnny uttered, as he slowly clenched his hands into fists, glaring at Deity with a scornful look, which soon transformed into a hateful look. Right now, he hated Deity just as much as he hated Metal. "...YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME!" he screamed, before he hurled a sphere of Corruption right at the bat, pushing aside the fact that Deity likely still outclassed him.

Deity swatted the sphere aside as if it was a mere fly, and it hit the wall of the cave instead. "I would think that when I predicted Jillian's death, you would've thought carefully about what that meant for Callous," he spoke. "It was your own fault of miscalculation, Johnny."

Breathing heavily, Johnny still glared at Deity, a raging fire swelling within him... however, he actually managed to calm himself, though he still glared at the vampire. "...you won't bring her back? Fine." he said, before he clenched his right hand into a fist. "...then I'll do it, myself."

"If you wish," Deity said. "I won't try to stop you...but Metal Sonic eventually will."

"...heh..." Johnny scoffed, as he began grinning. "...whatever gave you that idea? I don't think you've understood it yet, Deity... but I'm a lot stronger than you think." he said with a chuckle. "Remember the spirit-trick, which you said I couldn't master before I died? Guess what? I did! In fact..." Then, Johnny cracked his neck. "...I daresay that I'm even stronger than you."

"Just because you accomplish an ability, doesn't mean you mastered it," Deity reminded Johnny, as he turned and started walking back into the darkness.

"...and what's that supposed to mean?" Johnny called, as he watched Deity leave. "...hey! I'm talking to you! Don't walk out on me, you-" In that instant, however, he was silenced, as he heard the

sickly sound of flesh being torn apart, along with a few hollow, metallic clanks. Looking down, he saw that a robotic hand had pierced through his body, clutching the yellow Chaos Emerald, whilst the steel compartment had fallen to the ground.

"...I'm sorry; were you done?" a robotic voice uttered coldly. *"I couldn't hear it over me tearing a hole through your chest."*

"...M-Metal...?" Johnny uttered weakly, as he looked behind him, seeing those red, unfeeling eyes glare back at him.

"...that was for Jill." the Metallix uttered, before he vanished, leaving Johnny to collapse to the ground.

...n-no... Johnny thought, as his entire body began failing him. *...a-am I... going to die...? I... didn't even get to see her...* In that instant, he coughed up blood; however, there was something off about it. Johnny noticed this; namely, its color. It was not the crimson liquid he was so accustomed to seeing.

No, its color was pitch black.

"...is that... Corruption...?" he uttered, as he noticed a pool of blood gathering around him; or more accurately, a pool of black blood, reminiscent of Corruption in ooze-form. Somehow, seeing this black blood began changing something within him, and he could hear something he never thought he'd hear again.

A beating heart.

That was enough to cause the lion to let out an ungodly shriek, as the blood suddenly swallowed him up, encasing him in what appeared to be a cocoon; he was kept that way for a while, until he eventually fell silent.

She saw a light...and she followed it in wondering. The light became an image...a very blurry one...and soon her vision cleared...

Jill found herself lying in a familiar place, and with a quick look around, she realized she was in the very same chapel that resided

in her subconscious, but it looked damaged. Windows were bashed in, pews were knocked about, and the walls were crumbling. This place was in ruins, and not only that, but it was cold too.

She sat up, and clung to herself insecurely. "Am I...really dead?" she uttered. She couldn't believe what she had just done...that she really...

She grew scared, worried, and all around devastated. "...what have I done?" The truth of the matter was that even though she stopped Callous, it left Deity free. She couldn't do anything to stop Deity from going after her friends, or the Professor, or the GUN agents...

And the shock from having killed herself finally hit, making her break down and cry again.

"...You...!"

Jill gasped, and jumped to her feet while whirling around, seeing that she wasn't alone.

To her dread, Callous stood right there, slowly advancing her in a building fury. "...you...you ruined everything!" she snarled. "Because of you...Johnny's going to...!" She suddenly roared and charged at Jill like a bull, raising her fist.

Jill covered eyes in fear...but the punch never came. Slowly opening her eyes, she saw someone else that stepped up in front of her. Callous' fist hit a hard shell of some sort, and while Callous looked up at the face that the shell belonged to, her mouth dropped.

"No use fighting girls," a certain turtle said. "We're already dead."

"...Desperado..." Jill uttered under her breath, recognizing the turtle from Sage's vision.

Callous jumped back. "What are you doing here?" she barked. "Didn't Johnny absorb you?"

"When channeling those spirits back into him, you died before you could fully send in one particular spirit," Desperado explained. "It just so happened to be a friend of mine...so he grabbed me and Bliss

and we gave the slip-up away from Johnny without him knowing."

"Like, thank gods, too..." a female voice uttered, as a sheep walked towards the three. "I don't think that I, like, could stand another moment being, like, trapped in Johnny's body..."

"How we ended up here, we have no clue," Desperado said, finally turning to Jill. "But you're a curious sort..."

Jill looked from Desperado, to the female sheep. "...Bliss?"

"Like, that's my name..." Bliss nodded, as she looked at Jill.

"Well... we're all here, now..." a male voice uttered, as then, a male rabbit approached the group, his hands folded behind his back. "...wherever 'here' is..."

Then Jill glanced at the rabbit. "...Sprinter..."

Desperado cocked his head curiously while looking at Jill. "Now how is it you know our names?"

"...Sage..." Jill murmured.

"...Sage?" Bliss uttered, before she suddenly beamed. "Like, ohmygosh, you know Sage?" she said in a very giddy tone. "Like, I had no idea! How is she doing? Is she still, like, with King and the others?"

"Yeah...she's alright..." Jill uttered. "King...Queen...Ripper, Miser, Hunter and Wiper...all of them are..." thinking about them suddenly brought upon her earlier depression and fear, and she tried to wipe away the tears that came.

"...what's wrong?" Desperado asked.

"Well, no one would be in the brightest of spirits after killing themselves," Callous said, isolating herself from the four of them by sitting on an unbroken pew.

"...oh..." Bliss uttered, as her chipper attitude faded away. "...like... I'm sorry..."

"You had no idea of knowing, Bliss." Sprinter sighed, as he turned away from the group, as he held his hands in a way that made it seem like he was weighing the air, focusing his vision on that area.

Desperado put a hand on Jill's shoulder. "...you killed yourself, huh?" he said. "What for?"

Jill sniveled while trying to calm down. "...I did it to...keep someone from getting hurt," she muttered.

"I was using a "friend" of hers as a voodoo victim," Callous groaned. "But I didn't think she'd turn around and kill herself like that..."

Desperado looked at Callous, and then at Jill, and then at Callous again. "So when she killed herself, you died as well?" he asked.

"Yep," Callous grunted, turning away from him. "We're connected...long story."

Looking at Jill, Bliss couldn't help but rub her own arm whilst looking away; her actions actually reminded her of her last act as a living being.

"...there. I think I got it to work." Sprinter uttered, as he glanced back at the group. "Everyone, gather here, please."

Desperado was curious, but he had to bring Jill with him to Sprinter, while Callous wasn't interested in doing anything other than glance in that direction.

Blinking, Bliss approached Sprinter as well. "Like, what did you do?"

"...I've opened a way for us to observe what it's like in the living world." Sprinter said, and as the group would see, hovering above Sprinter's hands was a swirl of mist. The center of this swirl, however, showed a complete image of the entire planet. "Being deceased does hinder us from moving from where we died... so if we want to observe anyone, this is the way to do it."

"Pretty convenient I'd say," Desperado commented.

While looking at the entire planet, a random thought came to Jill that

she spoke aloud. "...I wonder if this is what it looks like from the ARK..." She remembered Shadow telling her about it.

"...likely." Sprinter shrugged. "...does anyone have someone they want to observe?"

Jill really wanted to see her friends, wondering if they knew of the news yet...but there was a concern of hers that became more important. "...I want to see what Metal is doing," she uttered, almost afraid of what she would see.

"Metal?" At first, Desperado didn't know what she was talking about, until... "...wait a minute, you're not talking about...Metal Sonic? THE Metal Sonic, created by Dr. Eggman?"

Jill nodded.

"...like, he's still around?" Bliss uttered. "I thought that he, like, was gone for a long while!"

"Well, give me a moment..." Focusing on the swirl, Sprinter's brow furrowed, as the viewpoint began moving down towards the planet, until it stopped by Metropolis, showing Metal entering the city.

"...woah... like, it's really him..." Bliss uttered.

Just as Metal entered one of the towers, the viewpoint followed him, until they reached a chamber, where three gems; one red, one blue and one white; were all resting on a pedestal. Approaching this pedestal, the Metallix placed a bloodied, yellow gem on it. *"...two more..."* he uttered.

"...a bloody, yellow Chaos Emerald?" Jill uttered, which made Callous react with a flinch.

"What?" and Callous was up on her feet, and coming over to take a closer look. Then her eyes widened. "...no...no he couldn't have..."

"...what?" Bliss uttered, as she looked from Callous to the swirl several times. "Like, what did he do?"

"Be quiet; I might catch a glimpse of it..." Sprinter said, as he

focused more intently on the swirl.

As he looked at the yellow Chaos Emerald, Metal folded his arms, letting the group see that his entire right arm was bloodied. *"...once I've taken care of Westopolis and Green Hill Zone, I'll pay the Clubhouse a visit... then the HQ... and then, I'll be ready."* Then, he walked out of the chamber.

...Ready for what? Jill wondered in thought with some worry. *Why is he collecting all the Chaos Emer-*

"AAAGH!" Jill's thoughts were interrupted by a scream, and next thing she knew Callous knocked her against the wall by her throat. "ARE YOU TELLING ME THAT TOASTER BASTARD KILLED JOHNNY TO GET THAT EMERALD?" Callous screamed in Jill's face.

"Like, WOAH!" Quickly, Bliss got between Jill and Callous, before her wool suddenly puffed up, separating the two from each other. "That's, like, NO good reason to suddenly lash out at her! Like, if Metal decided to off Johnny... then, like, she's got nothing to do with it!"

"If you would stop shouting..." Sprinter uttered, as he tried not losing his composure. "...I can try and trace Johnny, and see what has become of him... though, him being dead is a load off my mind."

"Good grief...like we needed a cat fight..." Desperado grumbled, while he got an unappreciated growl from Callous.

Meanwhile, Jill took a breath to get over that, since it startled her quite a bit. "...let's check on Johnny," she said.

"Alright..." Sprinter nodded, as the viewpoint rapidly moved away from Metropolis, before going across the globe, until it stopped within a completely dark cave... however, no one was in it.

"...like, did you get the right address, Sprinter?" Bliss uttered, as she glanced at the swirl.

"This is the place... but I can't see him, anywhere..." Sprinter uttered.

"...keep looking around in there," Jill said, walking closer to the swirl.

"...I'm looking..." Sprinter uttered, as the viewpoint began inspecting every inch of the cave, but still, nothing came up.

"...guys..." Bliss uttered, as she hid behind Desperado. "...like... I'm kind of freaked, right now..."

"If he killed Johnny, it would've left his body or some indication," Jill said. While thinking about it, she hoped that what she was assuming wasn't the case here, but with Corruption anything was possible. "...I just hope that the Corruption didn't spiral out of his control..."

"...Corruption?" Desperado questioned in puzzlement.

"...a force beyond our comprehension, Desperado." Sprinter said. "It was likely what allowed Johnny and Callous to absorb us, in the first place."

"Yeah... like, it felt really icky." Bliss nodded, as she shuddered.

"...hang on." At that point, Sprinter's ears perked, as he heard something that sounded fairly slimy. "...I... think we might be getting closer to something."

Jill shuddered when she heard that, and Callous stepped up to the swirl to see what could possibly be going on.

Soon, the viewpoint reached what Sprinter had heard, and what they saw, was not a pretty sight.

Plastered against a wall was a massive, pulsating blob of Corruption, tendrils of darkness swaying into it from every conceivable direction, with black slime dripping off it with regular intervals. What was worse, however, was that the group could see inside this blob, and there, curled up in a fetal position, was Johnny.

"...oh my god..." Bliss uttered, as she held her hands in front of her mouth, looking at the swirl with a horrified expression.

Jill was just as horrified at Bliss, while Callous was amazed.

"...what is that stuff doing to him?" Desperado questioned.

"...something magnificent," Callous suddenly chuckled. "I must say, I didn't think the Corruption would react in such a way..."

"I can only guess the Corruption's reaction was based on how he handled your death," Jill remarked, getting a very serious look.

"...S-Sprinter..." Bliss uttered, as she buried her face in Desperado's shoulder. "...p-please... like, I can't watch anymore! Find someone else to watch, please!"

Glancing at Bliss, who seemed like she was about to break down into tears then and there, Sprinter let out a small sigh, before looking at the swirl. "...Desperado, take Bliss out of here. I think she'll need some air."

"I would...if I knew how to get out of here..." Desperado murmured, for if everyone actually looked around, there were no visible doors in sight. However, he took Bliss aside anyhow, away from the view of the swirl.

"...I shouldn't have killed myself," Jill suddenly said. "I should have stayed alive...I would've been able to stop it…"

"...you did what you felt was right." Sprinter said, as he kept focusing on the swirl. "It might not have been the smartest thing to do... but it's the thought that counts. I've done something similar..." Saying that, he closed his eyes, letting out a sigh. "...Callous." he suddenly said, as his eyes opened. "...just what is happening to Johnny at the moment?"

"I assume that after Metal yanked the Chaos Emerald out of him, the Corruption reacted to keep Johnny from dying," Callous said. "And now, it's building in power, as well as regenerating him. See, unlike "Miss Perfect Angel" here," and she gestured to Jill, "I cannot heal myself, but if you're skilled enough, you can regenerate yourself using Corruption."

"Right...and the fact that you died had nothing to do with it," Jill murmured sarcastically.

"...I'm sure it contributed to it as well..." Callous uttered.

"...hrm..." Sprinter hummed, as he kept watching the swirl. Just then, he noticed something off about the blob. "...it's... cracking." As he said that, Jill and Callous saw that a sizable crack suddenly appeared on the blob's surface.

"...Uh-oh..." Jill uttered in fear, while Callous started smirking.

Soon, cracks began appearing all over the blob, as the tendrils eventually stopped entering it. Then, it shattered, sending Johnny, along with a large amount of liquid Corruption, crashing to the floor.

"...you said that he was being regenerated, Callous?" Sprinter uttered, as he observed Johnny, who was actually not moving from where he was lying. "...because he still seems to be dead."

"Just wait," Callous said.

Frowning, Sprinter kept watching the swirl. At that point, however, Johnny slowly began getting up on his feet, though without using his arms. Once he had fully stood up, the three could see that a gaping hole still went through his chest, though within it, they could see something moving about. "...is that... a heart?"

"...dear lord, its grotesque," remarked Jill in disgust, even though she had a strong enough stomach to watch.

"...to think that such a force exists..." Sprinter muttered, as he kept looking at Johnny. Strangely enough, the lion was simply standing there, his eyes remaining fully shut. "...what now?"

"To be honest, I actually don't know," Callous said. "Anything could happen at this point."

"...hm?" Blinking, Sprinter leaned closer to the swirl. "...I think he's opening his eyes."

Indeed; even though it was slow, Johnny was starting to open his eyes. However, instantly, the three could see that something was wrong; rather than their usual color, his eyes were completely red, and pupil-less, to boot.

"That doesn't look like a good sign at all," Jill said, growing a serious look.

Even Callous didn't expect that, and the looks of those eyes were actually fairly...creepy to her. Nonetheless, she didn't express it in any way.

Still, Johnny didn't move from where he stood, as he simply looked around him. Then, he slowly opened his mouth, though the moment he did, a feral snarl escaped his lips.

"...was that regeneration supposed to cause that, Callous?" Sprinter uttered, as he actually began growing nervous.

Callous hesitated to answer, but all she could say was, "...he doesn't seem like himself..."

"I think the Corruption had more of an effect than expected," Jill responded instead, surprisingly the calmest one out of them. "I could go as far as saying it literally...corrupted...his mind; no pun intended. That's my thought anyway."

"...his mind..." Sprinter uttered, as he gulped. "...then... what of his body?"

As if on cue, the liquid Corruption surrounding Johnny began crawling up his body, wrapping itself all around him, and even seeping into his body via the hole in his chest. Soon, his entire body was covered in Corruption, as his red eyes began glowing.

Jill grit her teeth at that. "...frankly, I think he's nothing more than a very dangerous animal now," she growled.

"...Animal?" Callous murmured.

Soon, Johnny slouched over, as something began slowly protruding from his back. Then, without warning, a pair of pitch-black wings shot from his back, small bits of Corruption dripping off them.

"...it's transformed his entire body..." Sprinter uttered.

"As I said, nothing but an animal now," Jill said.

"Change it." Jill was surprised to hear Callous say that, and looking at her, she had a hardened look on her face. "Change the scene. I don't want to see this anymore," Callous uttered. She still wondered why in the world this sight wasn't pleasing her in the slightest...she would've thought this to be absolutely delightful; a real opportunity to show just what Corruption could do.

But...this just wasn't for Johnny...he wasn't meant to turn into something like this...

"...no Callous, you watch it," Jill said sternly. "You watch it, and see just what you started. You did this to him after all...you were the one who introduced him to Corruption."

"You think I don't know that?" Callous snapped at Jill.

"Be quiet..." Sprinter hushed, as he was absolutely focused on the swirl now.

After he had looked at his wings, Johnny snarled, before he slowly began opening his mouth; however, dark energies began gathering within his mouth, with frightening speed. Just then, Johnny glared up at the ceiling, before letting loose a deafening, demonic roar, just as a beam of pure Corruption shot out of his mouth, tearing through the ceiling like wet tissue paper.

"...Johnny..." Callous muttered in disdain.

As the cave began collapsing around the lion as a result of his fierce attack, Johnny immediately began flying upwards, dodging falling rocks with surprising agility, until finally, he tore through to the outside, revealing that he had just about torn through an entire mountain.

"...such power..." Sprinter uttered with a shudder.

Jill closed her eyes solemnly. It really was strange how she was the calmest one out of all of them, but with Deity Novagod she had seen similar things happen to other people. They just weren't so powerful like Johnny was now.

"...please...change it now," Callous requested again.

Hearing Callous say that, Sprinter looked towards her, though he didn't change the image just yet. "...it seems that I was right." he uttered. "You weren't honest with me, back when you absorbed me..."

"...alright, alright I admit it," Callous said. "You were right...now please...please change the scene..."

This was a first for Jill seeing Callous plead like this. She was almost going to hold more of this against her, until something reoccurred in her thoughts; the dream she had this morning. Callous wasn't a separate person...she was a part of her...so would she really be so mean to herself? "...I would change it Sprinter," Jill said. "Besides...I want to see how my own friends are doing."

"...very well." Sprinter nodded, as the viewpoint quickly flew away from Johnny, going back to the planetary view. "...where might I find them?"

At the Clubhouse, Natal was walking through the halls, as she rubbed her eyes drowsily. "Mhrm... wonder if the others are up, yet..." she mumbled, just as she passed through the living room, where she saw that Lock was sitting in a chair in front of the TV, which was turned on. "...did he fall asleep while watching the box?" she noted, before chuckling.

As she walked to turn the TV off, however, the news started up, and one of the headlines caught Natal's interest. "...mass exodus from Westopolis?" she uttered. "...what in the world..."

The next one to pass by the living room was Cal, who had actually decided to get up earlier than usual. Seeing Natal in there staring at the TV made him curious, and he entered into the room. "What are you watching?" he asked, taking a look at the TV himself only to have the question answered for him.

"...this could be big." Natal uttered, as she glanced at Cal. "Wake the others up; I think they need to see this."

"...right," And Cal took off out the room immediately. The first he encountered were actually Milo and Shadow, which surprised him to see them awake this early. He stopped because something was suddenly unusual about the android. Nothing was indicated through the instruments in his cybernetic body, no...

...but the part of him that wielded Corruption...somehow, he sensed something weird about the android.

"Good morning Cal," Milo said, blinking at the fact that Cal was staring at Shadow.

"Oh, Milo," Cal snapped out of his weird state then. "You've got to go wake everyone else...there's something on the news everyone should see."

"...is there?" Shadow uttered, before he glanced down at Milo. "Well, we should hurry; the news won't be on forever."

Milo nodded, and got up from his seat quickly to run down the hall, leaving Cal and Shadow momentarily alone. This was when the monkey stared at the android again. "...there's something different about you this morning, Proxy," he suddenly said; and the longer he sensed it with Corruption, the more uneasy he seemed to get.

"...is there?" Shadow mused cluelessly, as he simply watched Milo leave. "I don't think I've noticed."

Cal stared longer yet, trying to determine what he was sensing until... "...Never mind. I'm going to wake up some of the others," he finally said, turning down the hall and running.

As he did that, Shadow shifted his gaze towards the monkey. *...he noticed...* he thought, before he headed down the hallway, headed towards the living room.

Eventually, Cal passed by all of the kids all hurdled together in a group, along with Whisker. "Cal, what's going on?" Rudy asked while rubbing his eyes.

"Something's going on the news that you need to see," Cal said. "Head to the living room. I'll get Brick," and he took off again down

the hall.

"...the news?" Jack uttered, as he scratched the back of his head. "What's going on, there?"

"Well, let`s go an' be seein', an' we`ll find ou', I guess." Whisker shrugged, as he began walking down the hall, with the kids following.

"Chao!" Buddy commented, as the group left down the hall.

Just as soon as they arrived at the living room, Cal came from another hall with Brick and Tails Doll behind him, and all of them entered into the living room to see the TV. "Anything else happen yet, Natal?" Cal asked.

"Just listen..." Natal uttered, as she turned the volume up.

"...reports are coming in that all over Westopolis, which has been under seige by Neo Metal Sonic for the past few weeks, is currently being emptied!" the reporter said in a serious tone. "As we speak, hordes of robots are evacuating the city, bringing technological equipment out of the high-rise buildings and out of the city limits!"

"...Westopolis is being emptied...?" Tails Doll uttered. *"...only Big Bro could do something like that... but why?"*

"...hrm?" At that point, Lock woke up, as he noticed the large crowd in front of the TV. "...what's going on?"

"Something's happening in Westopolis, Lock," Brick answered, looking intently at the TV. "But like Tails Doll said...why would Metal do this?"

"Wait a moment!" the reporter suddenly said, as he pressed his finger against his ear. "I am currently receiving reports... that robots from Westopolis are reverting Green Hill Zone to its original form! I repeat, Green Hill Zone is currently being de-mechanized!"

"...say what?" Natal uttered in complete surprise.

Cal's eyes widened. *Metal? Why in the world...?*

"...but why would Metal do that?" Jack uttered, as he looked at the others with a surprised look. "He doesn't have any reason to-"

"Wait..." the reporter uttered, as he glanced around him. "...someone seems to be hacking into our feed? Just who is this?" he said in a nervous tone.

"...pardon my interruption..." a very familiar voice uttered from the speakers in the news studio. *"...but I have an announcement to make."*

Brick's jaw dropped. "No way...is that really...?"

"...Big Bro?" Tails Doll uttered as well.

Gulping nervously, the reporter looked around him. "...wh-what kind of announcement?" he said.

"I'm glad you asked." Metal's voice uttered. *"By now, you must have noticed that I am pulling my forces out of Westopolis, and restoring Green Hill Zone. The reason for that is... well, I've realized that to accomplish my goals... I need to eliminate a certain "target", so to speak."*

" Target?" Brick said. "Target? What's this supposed to mean for Brownie, huh? What about her?" Brick was getting considerably worried now, and hearing him say that made Milo and Ani look at each other uneasily. They hoped that what they were thinking hadn't happened...

I wonder if he's talking about Deity Novagod, Cal thought.

"Therefore," Metal continued, *"until I have eliminated that target, I cannot spare any of my forces elsewhere. So, I suppose this is a time for you to relax; it might be tomorrow, it might be weeks, even months from now... but until the target is eliminated... no one will have to worry about me."*

"...M-Metal Sonic!" the reporter suddenly said. "We do have a few questions about..." he began, but was silent for a short while. Then... "...he's off the feed."

"...hm." Lock hummed, as he folded his arms. "...that was a pretty risky move. I'm certain that they're trying to trace his signal as we speak."

"Hm..." Cal hummed while he continued to think, and then... "...excuse me a moment, would you?"

"Cal?" Rudy spoke, watching the monkey leave the room.

As soon as he was outside on the balcony, he pressed his ear communicator. *Metal Sonic, this is Cal,* he transmitted. *I saw your announcement on the news. Is there anything you need me to do at this moment?*

However, there was no reply.

So Cal tried again. *Metal, come in...are you even there?*

Still, there was no reply. At least, until... *...return to the living room .*

Cal didn't expect that at all, but he followed the order without much questioning, entering inside and gradually making his way back into the living room.

Once he returned, Natal glanced at him. "...what was it?" she inquired.

Before Cal could reply, however, Shadow tensed. "...someone just used Chaos Control..." he uttered. "...he's here!"

"Good!" Brick growled, balling up his fist. "He's got some answering to do!"

"That, I'm afraid, will have to wait."

Hearing that robotic voice, everyone turned to one of the halls, where Metal Sonic himself stood; however, they could instantly see something he carried; a cyan gemstone. "...the Chaos Emerald!" Jack uttered.

"What be he doin' wi' that?" Whisker said, as he glared at the Metallix.

"You'll learn of it soon enough." Metal said, as he slowly raised his free hand, pointing it at the group. *"...but not yet. Chaos Control !"*

"Chaos C-" Before Tails Doll could even hope to finish that sentence, all of them suddenly vanished, leaving Metal on his own in the living room.

"...now, only one remains..." Metal mused, as he looked at the cyan Emerald. *"...and then..."* After he said that, he vanished as well.

Chapter 78

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-EIGHT

Charmy had seen the exact same news report, along with Cream, and woke every one of the GUN agents (and even the Commander) to see it. Once it was over, the old bee slumped back in his chair in disbelief, while Cream looked afraid. "What could this mean?" the old rabbit uttered.

"...something big's gonna happen, that's for sure." King muttered, as he folded his arms with a frown. "Still... I gotta wonder what he's thinking..."

Wiper merely hissed, as he glanced at Miser, who was trying to hide a worried look.

"...you guys think that the others at the Clubhouse caught the news as well?" Newt mused, as he scratched his head.

"They probably did," Boomer replied, looking over the emerald she had in her hands. "...but it leaves a lot of questioning about why Metal's doing this. I mean, whatever happened to training Jill for her battle?"

A small knot tied up Hunter's throat when he heard Boomer say that. "...who knows," he managed to say with a straight face.

"...kekeke..." Ripper uttered, as he glanced out of a window... when all of a sudden, the group from the Clubhouse suddenly appeared right outside, with absolutely no warning. "KEKE?"

"Hm? What's wrong, Ripper?" Queen uttered, as she glanced at the mantis, before her gaze went towards the window, where she saw the group as well. "...what the..."

Everyone else crowded around the window too, seeing them to the same disbelief...well, some more than others. "What's HE doing here?" Boomer snarled, spotting out Cal right away with a profuse

hatred.

Meanwhile, outside, they are were just as confused as the others inside. "...Are we at the Chaotix HQ?" Rudy questioned in shock.

"METAL!" Brick screamed at the top of his lungs into the sky. "GET BACK HERE DAMN IT!"

"...he must have had some reason to bring us all here..." Shadow mused, as he looked around him.

Inside, whilst the group were occupied with seeing the group, all of a sudden, something cold suddenly snatched away the purple emerald that Boomer was holding. *"I'll take that."*

"Hm?" Blinking, the commander, along with the others, glanced in the direction of the voice, and standing there was Metal Sonic, a tendril clutching the Chaos Emerald tightly. "...you..."

"Metal!" Boomer bellowed, once she realized he had stolen the emerald. Her yell was even loud enough that the group outside heard her.

"That sounded like Boomer!" Rudy uttered.

"Metal's in there!" Brick growled, and before anyone could stop him, he charged inside.

However, once Brick got to the others, he only just managed to spot the Metallix before he warped out of sight.

"GOD DAMN IT!" the bull screamed, certainly startling Cream and Charmy quite a bit. By the time Brick was done yelling, the others made it inside to the scene, and everyone was finally gathered together in the same room.

"Captain!" Rudy hurried to the old bee, throwing his arms around Charmy's legs. Charmy knelt down then to properly hug Rudy.

"...well, this is fairly unorthodox." Wiper noted, as he glanced in Natal's direction, noticing that she was standing next to Cal; however, he made no comment about it.

"...so Metal brought you all here." Sage said with only a brief glance at Brick. "Too bad that he warped away so quickly; I didn't get a chance to read him."

"Did Metal say anything to any of you?" Charmy asked, after he was done hugging Rudy.

"Not a damn thing!" Brick snarled, pounding his fist in his palm.

"Brick Cainfield, please use more appropriate words to describe your anger," Cream scolded. "There are children here after all."

"Yeah, for instance..." Boomer started, taking a few steps forward...and then suddenly rushing at Cal with a punch. "C'MERE!"

"Ah!" Cal ducked beneath her punch, but Boomer managed to get him with a kick, knocking him into a wall at the side. Boomer didn't stop at all, and she picked up a wrench that she had with her, coming after Cal to hit him as hard as she could.

"Boomer, STOP!" Rudy pleaded; he really didn't want to see this happen.

However, when Boomer was about to swing at Cal, someone suddenly grabbed it, holding it in place. "...that's enough." Natal uttered coldly, as she gave Boomer an icy stare while she held the duck in place. "Drop the wrench."

"Natal!" Newt uttered in surprise, as he looked at the bullfrog. "What're you-"

"First off; Cal's changed from the last time you saw him." Natal began, without taking her eyes off Boomer. "Second; we have bigger things to worry about, right now. So drop the wrench."

A moment of silence...and then, "Fine," Boomer grumbled, throwing the wrench on the ground grudgingly.

"Thank you." Natal nodded, before she folded her arms. "...you said that Metal Sonic was here, Sage?"

"Yeah; and he took the Chaos Emerald we had, too..." Sage

nodded. "...this is strange, though; what would possess Metal to act like this?"

"Maybe we should ask him now?" Shadow said, as he looked out of the window. "...after all, he's out there."

As it turned out, standing outside of the HQ was Metal Sonic, as he simply looked up at the building.

Brick was about to break into another run for outside, but Cal snatched him by the tail and pulled him back, with the bull complaining about the pain when he landed on his butt on the ground. "Ow, what was that for?"

"Don't be so rash, Brick," Cal said.

"Cal...maybe you can talk to Metal?" suggested Milo.

To that, Cal sighed. "...I can try, but I'm not sure he'll even listen to me."

"...well, then, give it a shot!" King pressed, as he glared at Cal. "If we can find out just what the hell his deal is..."

Cal looked out the window again to see if Metal was still there. Since he was, he worked his way through the HQ until he was outside, and through that point, he walked slowly toward Metal. "Metal..." he said, hoping to get his attention.

"...what, no one else is coming out?" Metal mused, as he didn't take his eyes off the building. *"I'd have expected more of an audience."*

"Well judging by how you avoided everyone, I wouldn't think you'd readily answer every single one of them at once," Cal murmured. Then he sighed again. "What's going on, Metal? Why are you doing this?"

"...I'm not at liberty to tell one person at a time." Metal responded. *"The reason I avoided you was because I needed to deposit a few items... now, I don't need to do that."*

"...you're not making any sense Metal," Cal said, shaking his head.

"Maybe I'll start making sense, if you get the others out here." Metal said matter-of-factly, still not looking at Cal.

"...fine," Cal muttered, pressing his ear communicator. "Proxy, bring everyone out here," he transmitted.

While he didn't get a response, soon enough, everyone in the building walked outside, all of them eyeing Metal. *"...the crowd gathers..."* he mused, before closing his eyes. *"...ask any questions you'd like, but stay calm about this."*

"Alright," Charmy said. "First off...who's this "target" you said you were going after, Metal?"

"I believe that, by this point, the answer should be obvious." Metal said, as he looked at Charmy.

"...Deity Novagod, then." Shadow uttered, as he glanced at Metal.

"Bingo." Metal nodded.

"And next..." Charmy continued, while rubbing his chin. "What do you intend to do with the Chaos Emeralds?"

"Simply a means to deal with Novagod." Metal shrugged. *"I can't give out details, though; it'd spoil the surprise."*

"...I see," Charmy said, closing his eyes. "And-"

"Where's Brownie?" Brick cut in, giving the metallix a very cold, demanding stare. "If you're off doing this...then what about her?" That question brought everyone to glance at Metal in wondering.

Looking at everyone, Metal slowly folded his arms behind his back. *"...she defeated Callous."* he said after a while.

"...is that so?" Brick said, though he greatly questioned whether or not that was true. "Then how come she isn't with you right now?"

"...maybe because she was so tired after the fight, Brick?" assumed Striker.

As Striker said that, Metal glanced to the side.

"...Metal." Wiper uttered, as he stepped forward a bit. "...where is Jill?"

"...do you really wish to know?" Metal uttered, still not looking at the group.

"Metal..." Milo stepped up, and he was just about to break into tears; something that actually surprised and scared everyone. "...please, tell us..."

Looking down at Milo, Metal eventually closed his eyes. *"...Jill..."* he began, though for a while, he didn't say anything.

"...well?" Shadow uttered, as he raised an eyebrow.

Then, Metal looked back at the group. *"...she's dead."*

It was completely silent.

Brick's tough demeanor was instantly shattered the moment he heard those words, and while his eyes widened in unbelievable shock...tears began to appear, and run down his cheek. "...no..." he uttered. According to the kids, this was the first time they ever saw Brick cry; heck, this was the first time probably anyone saw Brick cry. He was usually known to be so tough...

...but he fell down on his knees while more tears fell down from his sorrowful eyes. "...Metal...you can't be serious..." he uttered in despair.

Metal, however, gave him no reply, as he folded his arms, looking down at the ground.

"...how... did it happen?" Miser uttered, as she looked at Metal with a distraught look. "...d-did Callous-"

"No." Metal said briefly, as he closed his eyes, before giving a brief, very low confession: *"...I did it."*

Hearing that, Queen's eyes widened. "...what did you say?"

"I said..." Metal uttered, before he looked at the group again. *"...I... killed Jill."*

Brick threw his fist on the ground, trying so hard not to break into such a heartbroken sob. He was trying to work through his emotions as best as he could, but the only thing that grew was total grief, and boiling anger. Slowly, he got back up without looking at anyone...

...and then he grabbed Metal by the shoulders. "HOW COULD YOU?" he screamed right in Metal's face. "You were supposed to make sure NOTHING happened to her! You gave us your word!"

"...what?" Metal actually chuckled, before he simply pushed Brick away. *"Did you forget just who you're dealing with? I've been playing everyone for a complete and utter fool..."* Then, he glanced at Cal and Tails Doll. *"...even my allies."*

"...B-Big Bro..." Tails Doll uttered. *"...how could you...?"*

"Oh, it really was amazing..." Metal chuckled, as he closed his eyes. *"Sure, Jill had been weakened, but she eventually managed to defeat Callous... and the moment she turned to me to affirm her victory, I struck her down."* After he said that, he looked up at Brick. *"Seeing that distraught, betrayed look on her face before the life ebbed out of her... was truly worth putting up with this week-long façade."*

"I knew you couldn't trust him," growled Boomer.

And as for Brick...his own emotions were peaking out of control. A red aura of Chaos Energy appeared around the enraged bull, mainly coming from his ring. "You...you BASTARD!" he screamed, aiming to punch Metal right there with a Chaos-coated fist.

Surprisingly enough, however, Metal actually took the attack head-on, sending him flying a good distance away, before he crashed against the ground. *"...are you satisfied?"* he uttered, as he looked up at Brick, without getting up.

"NO I'M NOT!" Brick screamed, running right after the metallix just as the red Chaos Energy around him transformed into a giant red

bull, aiming to strike Metal with a charge.

Again, Metal didn't even bother evading, as he was knocked further away by Brick. *"...do you hate me?"* he uttered, remaining immobile on the ground.

"YES! YES I HATE YOU!" Brick bellowed at the top of his lungs. "You took away the one thing that was the most precious to me!" Brick came over and picked Metal up with tremendous strength, using this opportunity to punch Metal as hard as he could with the other hand. "You used her! And she trusted you!" he continued to scream as he kept punching Metal, even if his own fist was bleeding.

"...Brick..." croaked an upset Milo, but he was unheard.

"...she was a fool for trusting me." After a while, Metal suddenly grabbed hold of Brick's fist, and even with the extra power Brick was getting, the Metallix was overpowering him. *"As were you all."* Then, he pushed Brick with enough force to send him hurtling back towards the group. *"...I'm done with you. You should prepare for my reign as soon as* Deity *is destroyed."* After saying that, Metal turned to leave.

Brick only got back up, and he let out a roar of rage as he ran at Metal again. "WELL I'M NOT DONE WITH YOU, YOU LIFELESS, COLD EMPTY SHELL!" And he channeled all the Chaos Energy he could muster into this fist, throwing it at Metal from behind.

However, he ended up hitting nothing but air, as Metal vanished. *"...that's me in a nutshell."* he uttered coldly, as he suddenly reappeared in front of Brick, his palm slowly moving towards his face. *"I am a killing machine ."* Then, with surprising agility, Metal grabbed hold of Brick's head, and slammed Brick down into the ground, keeping him pinned. *"And if you do not stop pestering me, I will not hesitate to kill you, too... while everyone is watching."*

While pinned, Brick finally broke down and wept while Metal still had him pinned. "Do it then!" he sobbed.

"Brick!" Boomer uttered.

"Kill me then! Get it over with now!" Brick continued. "...there's no way I'd be able to live without...Brownie..." he shook terribly as he cried on the ground, becoming quite a basket case.

"...tsch. Pathetic." Metal scoffed, before he let go of Brick, looking down at him with disdain. *"...how can you be so quick to want to throw your life away? That is utter idiocy of the highest caliber."* Then, he began walking away. *"Farewell."*

"...BIG BRO!" Tails Doll suddenly yelled, as he rocketed in front of Metal, glaring at him. *"What's gotten into you? This isn't like you at all, Big Bro!"*

"...it's exactly like me." Metal uttered, before he raised his arm. *"Now move."* he added, before slamming his arm right into Tails Doll, knocking the plushie straight to the ground, before he kept walking away.

"Tails Doll!" Ani cried, running after the doll to check to see if he was alright.

Brick only continued to sob his broken heart out on the ground. Some of the others gathered around Brick in concern, but no matter how many times they called his name, he ignored them.

Still, Metal paid the group no heed, as he closed his eyes whilst walking away. *...now... for Novagod...*

"...you should be ashamed, Metal Sonic." Sage suddenly uttered in a strained tone. "You are, without a doubt... the worst liar I have ever met in my entire life."

Hearing that sentence, Metal stopped, as his eyes suddenly widened. *...did she just...* he thought, without looking back.

Brick's crying actually died down, but he didn't look up. Meanwhile, the others were pretty shocked hearing Sage say that.

"...what did you say?" Lock uttered, as he looked at Sage.

"I have been standing here for quite a while, listening to the drivel

this idiot has been spouting..." Sage uttered, as she closed her eyes. "...and no matter how hard he tries, he is saying exactly the opposite of what he's been thinking. Quite frankly, it's pissing me off."

Everyone looked back at Metal.

"...Metal...was lying?" Striker sputtered, trying to comprehend it through all the hard feelings he had.

"Hence why I called him the worst liar I've ever met." Sage nodded. "He doesn't even want to lie, that's how bad it is." Then, she glared at Metal. "...how about it? Who wants to hear what Metal Sonic's really thinking?"

"...you wouldn't dare..." Metal uttered, as he slowly clenched his hands

"You know what? I would like to know," Charmy said with a very cold tone. "And why he would tell such a cruel lie for that matter."

"...his thoughts are jumbled; in flux." Sage said, as she kept glaring at Metal. "...it's for the best. Who would believe me? This will keep them off my case." she uttered, as if she was in a trance; reciting Metal's thoughts word for word.

Obviously, this was starting to take an effect on Metal, as he looked down at the ground. *"...stop it..."* he uttered.

"...why?" Sage continued. "Why? Why do they look at me like that? What else could I say? The truth? They would only assume the worst. Why? Why did it come to this? Why? Why? Why didn't I act more cautious? Why? Why? Why? Because of me..."

"...no..." Metal uttered, as he held his hands over his ears. *"...get out of my head..."*

"...why? Why? It's all my fault. Why? Why? Why? I couldn't stop it. Why? Why? Why? Why? I was a fool. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?"

"...shut up..." Metal uttered, as a dark-green aura began building up

around him. *"...shut up..."*

"...why did she sacrifice herself... for me?"

That did it. With a roar, Unity suddenly exploded around the Metallix, as he spun around to glare at Sage. *"I TOLD YOU TO SHUT UP!"* he screamed, as he hurled a sphere of Unity right at the raven; thankfully, Miser suddenly got in front of Sage, knocking the sphere away before it could strike the raven, letting it explode harmlessly to the side.

Then, there was only silence.

"...she...what?" Brick actually made a reaction, pulling his head up.

Breathing heavily, Metal kept glaring at Sage, who simply looked back at him with a neutral stare. *"...you..."* he uttered. *"...you..."* At that point, however, the Metallix suddenly clutched his chest in pain, as he doubled over, forced down to his knees.

"...Metal?" Milo uttered.

What's wrong with him? Hunter thought. *Did Sage break him?*

"...no, Hunter, I didn't." Sage uttered in surprise. "...this is something entirely different."

"Big Bro?" Seeing Metal sink down like that, Tails Doll quickly fluttered to his side. *"Big Bro, what's wrong? Come on, you..."* he began, though soon, he saw something strange starting to happen to Metal's body. Liquid metal was literally dripping off his robotic body, as the Metallix actually began groaning in pain.

Everyone gawked at Metal, but the only other one that actually ran for the metallix was Milo. "Metal!"

However, with one quick glare at the lion, Metal sent out a tendril that blocked Milo from approaching him. ". *..don't... come near me...!* " he uttered weakly, before he winced in more pain, pressing his hands against his chest, as if it would relieve him of pain.

"Big Bro!" Tails Doll said in shock, as he cautiously fluttered a bit

away from Metal. *"What's happening to you? Wha-"* Just then, both of Metal's hands suddenly sank directly into his chest. *"AAAAHH!"*

With another pained cry, Metal managed to pull out his hands from his chest, though he also pulled something else from his body; the green Chaos Emerald, which fell to the ground as Metal began twitching in pain, a small pool of liquid metal having amassed around him at this point.

"...wait a minute..." Sage uttered, as something dawned on her. "...that dark-green energy! That's what's causing this!"

"That dark green energy?" Cal muttered. Using a variety of his instruments...and his Corruption sense...he figured what the energy was judging by the Purity, Corruption AND Chaos energy that he detected in there. To this, his eyes widened. *...Is that...the energy he created using the three entities?* he thought.

"Aaagh...!" Metal cried, as he weakly tried pushing himself off the ground, but to no avail. At this point, with the amount of liquid metal dripping off him, it actually looked like the Metallix was melting.

"...Metal..." Shadow uttered, as he and the others could only watch the Metallix be tortured like that.

At that point, the liquid metal amassed underneath Metal actually began bubbling, as if it was boiling, before it suddenly erupted up around Metal, encasing him in what seemed like a cocoon of liquid metal. Then, they could hear terrifying screams of anguish bellow from within this cocoon, until after a few painful moments passed, when it all fell silent.

No one dared to break the silence once more, awaiting to see what would happen next.

After what seemed like an eternity, from the bottom to the top, the cocoon seemed to disintegrate, letting everyone see what became of Metal.

And once it was gone, not a single soul present remained unaffected.

From the lower half and up to the waist, there was no true, notable difference, but upwards, Metal had been transformed. Gone was the sleek, metallic armor, the claw-like hands, and the cybernetic visor; replaced by a thin layer of dark-blue fur with a peach-colored tummy, a pair of white gloves connected to peach-skinned arms, and a pair of real, red eyes. Aside from a few cosmetic things, such as the shoulder pads and collars, his upper half no longer looked like Neo Metal Sonic.

Somehow, Metal Sonic had turned into an actual living, breathing Mobian, and the scariest thing was...he looked a lot like Sonic; go figure since he had been modeled after the famous hedgehog.

"Oh...my..." Cream choked on her words, because there was no way to express her response to seeing this.

Suffice to say, everyone felt a massive shock at seeing Metal's new form, as he simply looked at them. At that point, however, he stumbled, before he collapsed on the ground, his breath brief and rapid.

"Metal!" Milo finally tried to approach him again, and even Cal decided to head toward him, just to make sure he was alright.

Once they got to him, however, they couldn't get him to either stand up or respond to them; in fact, he felt like he had a severe fever, all of a sudden.

"...incredible," Cal murmured under his breath. Not about the fever, but obviously about what happened to Metal. "C'mon, get up," he said, taking Metal's arm and attempting to help pull him up.

Even as Cal pulled him up, Metal was simply hanging from where the monkey was holding him; as if the transformation had sapped all strength from his body.

"Ooof," And Metal was heavy as Cal tried to pull him up. "I'll need some help, guys," Cal said, prompting Hunter to come and take Metal by the other arm to contribute .

"...get him inside." Sage said, as she kept looking at Metal. *...he's*

really been through a lot... she thought.

While the two of them carried Metal back inside the HQ, Striker wiped tears away from his eyes, keeping himself from breaking down into tears. "...its not fair," he sputtered. "Jill...she wasn't supposed to die..."

"...why did she have to..." Jack muttered, as he too was trying to hold his tears back.

With a sigh, Sage watched as Cal and Hunter carried Metal inside the building.

"...Sage?" King uttered, as he looked at the raven.

"...I'll need to sit down and have a talk with Metal." Sage mused, as she glanced at King. "In the meantime... there's broken spirits that need mending."

The most broken spirit of all was probably still Brick, who sat quietly by himself, cradling his head in his arms. "...Brownie..." he muttered. Boomer came over and sat with him, putting a hand on his shoulder, but even then, it didn't comfort the bull one bit.

"This is quite the soap opera," Desperado remarked.

Jill paid no mind to Desperado's comment, as she could only watch in pure disdain. It really hurt her seeing the way her friends grieved, especially Brick, and it just made her wish even more that she hadn't killed herself...

...but what Metal transformed into...

It even surprised Callous, who rubbed her chin. "...to think, Unity did that to him..." she mused.

"...like, totally out of the left field, and everything..." Bliss muttered.

"...I do have to wonder how it happened, though." Sprinter mused. "The last time I checked, machines couldn't simply become organic

at the drop of a hat."

"For the longest time, he was altered by the three energies, Corruption, Purity, and Unity," Callous said. "First it let him feel real, human emotions, and then I guess it led up to that." Then she looked over at Jill. "Seems your death triggered that."

"...but, like, why did he turn into a human? It doesn't make sense!" Bliss protested.

"...what sort of... abilities does he have, Jill?" Sprinter inquired, as he kept watching the swirl. "Perhaps that might have been a contributing factor to his transformation..."

"...well, he can copy the data of his opponents in more ways than one," Jill said. "He can use powers of others...as well as even transform into them...when we saw Eggman's spirit, he said that the Chaos data he programmed into Metal was responsible for those abilities...he also said that the Chaos data was reacting to the three energies."

"Wait a minute...you saw Eggman's spirit?" Desperado said.

"Hey, I did too," Callous added with a shrug.

"...hrm..." Sprinter hummed. "...I'm only guessing here... but I believe that the transformation was one preformed subconsciously by the data; likely due to his outburst."

"...but, like, you met Eggman's spirit?" Bliss uttered, as she glanced at Jill. "...did he, like, go anywhere?"

"He stayed in Metropolis, waiting to give Metal something," Jill said. "I guess he passed on after he did..." That opened up a thought in Jill that made her gasp. "...is that what Metal's doing?"

"What?" Callous said. "Oh, you mean Eggman gave him the "confidential information" about technology that would help him conquer the world?"

"...that must of been why he was collecting the Chaos Emeralds," Jill uttered.

"...but, like, he said that he was gathering the Chaos Emeralds to deal with Deity Novagod." Bliss uttered, as she scratched her head. "And in that news report, he, like, said that he wouldn't try anything until he'd taken out his target, who is Novagod, right?"

"...he's stayed awfully secretive about this..." Sprinter muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...I wonder what he could have been planning..."

"...I don't know," Jill said. "I really don't know..."

"I'm really amazed why he tried to lie like that as well," Callous said. "He was even trying to lie to himself from what it looked like."

"...this could only be a theory..." Sprinter hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...but maybe, with the Chaos Emeralds and whatever technology Eggman gave him knowledge of... he would try and stop Deity?"

"...you mean, like..." Bliss uttered, as she looked at Sprinter with a stunned look. "...even if he'd be destroyed as a result?"

"Perhaps he tried making sure that no one'd feel sorry for him, if the event came and Deity destroyed him." Sprinter shrugged. "Right now... I have a feeling that only that raven can get the answers out of him."

"...do you think we could watch that? Sage talking to Metal?" Jill asked quietly. "I'd rather see that...then watch my friends fall apart like this...I just can't really take anymore of it."

"...I'll switch it over." Sprinter nodded, as the viewpoint slowly went inside the building. "Give me a-" At that moment, Sprinter suddenly tensed, as the viewpoint stopped moving completely.

"...Sprinter?" Bliss uttered. "Like, what's wrong?"

"...oh, no..." the rabbit uttered, as he actually began growing pretty scared. "...he's approaching the HQ."

"...you mean Johnny?" Jill blurted, sharing the same fear that arose in Sprinter, and hearing her say that made Callous flinch.

"...it's not that fast..." Sprinter uttered, as the viewpoint quickly zoomed away from the HQ, going much further away, before locking onto Johnny, who was soaring through the sky. "...but at this rate, he'll still be there in about ten minutes!"

Jill became extremely worried, and tense. Before she could do or say anything though, Desperado set a hand on her shoulder. "Calm down now," Desperado said.

"...right now, we can only try to calm down..." Sprinter muttered, before he closed his eyes. *...and pray for them.* he thought, just so he wouldn't worry Jill.

"How is he holding up?" Walking into a guest room, Sage glanced at Cal and Hunter, who had just gotten Metal Sonic in a bed.

"The fever dropped a degree or two," Cal said. "But nothing else changed."

"Have a look for yourself," Hunter said.

Looking at the hedgehog in bed, Sage slowly approached him, before sitting down next to him. "...hey. Can you hear me?"

Metal, however, didn't respond, as he merely shifted his position in bed.

"...hm. Less than a few minutes, and he's gotten himself sick, somehow..." Sage muttered, as she slowly placed her hands on Metal's head. "I'll need to go deeper... so don't disturb me; otherwise, his mind could be damaged beyond repair." Then, once her hands were in contact with his head, she closed her eyes.

Hunter decided to sit back against the wall and take a small breather, while Cal looked over Metal and Sage. "...I can't believe it happened," Hunter finally murmured. "Jill...gone..."

"...hm..." Sage nodded, without moving her hands away from Metal.

Hunter became quiet again, allowing Sage to fully concentrate on

what she was doing, while Cal kept watching them.

After a while, Sage removed her hands from Metal, before letting out a sigh. "...he's really been affected by her death..." she mused. "His subconscious has basically retreated to the inner recesses of his mind... even if we treat his fever, I doubt that we'll be able to wake him."

"...was he seriously that traumatized?" Cal asked in amazement.

"...I'd never think I'd say this, but he has every right to be." Sage said, as she glanced at Cal and Hunter. "After all, the reason she died... was to save him from Callous."

Both Hunter's and Cal's eyes widened. "...what happened?" Hunter managed to ask.

"...Callous had found a way to inject Corruption directly into Metal's body, causing him immense pain." Sage replied, as she glanced back down at Metal. "To stop her, Jill decided to end the fight then and there... by killing herself, taking Callous with her."

"...Jill really...did that?" Cal croaked.

"...brave girl," Hunter murmured under his breath. "...looks like what the twins said was true after all."

"Wait a minute...what are you talking about?" Cal questioned, shooting a quick look at Hunter.

Quickly shooting a glance at Hunter, Sage sighed. "...cat's out of the bag..." she muttered.

"...what?" Cal uttered, looking back and forth between the two.

"...okay, we have a confession," Hunter said. "Yesterday, a few of us went investigating: Sage, me, Milo, Ani, Miser, Ripper, Proxy, and Lock. Milo said the spirits in the spirit world were getting uneasy about this day, and they spoke of a "Holy Mother" falling to a great evil. Our trip took us to Angel Island..."

Cal was in disbelief. "...you went to...Angel Island?"

Sage nodded. "...it was a mess." she said, before she stood up. "Apart from the main island, several pieces of land were suspended in mid air, torn apart by an unknown force... Miser went off on her own to investigate someplace else, while the rest of us went to the main island."

"So we went to a tomb, only for Milo to say it was totally empty of any spirits," Hunter said. "The minute we came back outside, we were ambushed by...zombies."

"...zom...bies?" Cal didn't like the sound of that.

"Minions, created by Deity Novagod, I presume." Sage muttered. "They were being led by Bloom and Gloom; two butterfly twins from back in the day, who had also been resurrected by Novagod. They sent the zombies at us, and we held them off."

"At one point though, they finally backed off," Hunter continued. "That gave Sage the opportunity to corner the little brats, and after a little chat, we found out what we wanted to know..." Then he turned to the side, looking at the ground. "...the Holy Mother the spirits were referring to was Goddess, and she gave herself up to Deity Novagod on the condition that he didn't hurt Jill..."

"...no way..." Cal uttered.

"Way," Hunter remarked. "It was then that they told us Deity Novagod predicted that Jill would die today...and as it turned out, his prediction was right..."

"Tsch..." Sage grunted, as she clenched her hands tightly into fists. "...we did manage to dispose of the two runts... but with Metal Sonic out like this... we literally have no defense against Novagod..."

"...even so, we shouldn't give up hope..."

Cal flinched when he heard that voice from the doorway. "...Captain," he spoke, watching Charmy walk into the room. The old bee came around and took a look at Metal for a minute, before looking up at Sage.

"Metal might be down, but if anything he'll only get back up," Charmy

said with a sure nod. "He'll want revenge...bad enough that he'll come out of his coma on his own."

"...somehow, I have my doubts about that, Captain." Sage uttered, as she looked down at Metal. "He hasn't just hidden his subconscious because he felt like it... the impact of both Jill's death and his transformation have sent him spiraling into a deep depression..."

"But there have been many surprises before; who's to say Metal won't surprise us as well?" Charmy said. "Perhaps he does stay like this for awhile...but it won't be forever." Then he closed his eyes. "...if he is still anything like Sonic, then he'll get back up to fight."

"...let's hope that you're right..." Sage muttered, before she placed her hands against Metal's head again. "...do you three think you can check up on the others? I need to keep speaking with Metal..."

"...alright..." Hunter said, taking Cal with him out the door, leaving Charmy behind a minute.

"...I should phone Tails," Charmy said, finally turning and walking out himself. "...he needs to know as well."

"...very well." Sage nodded, as she returned her focus to Metal.

Outside, each of them were trying their best to deal with the situation at hand, individually.

Brick hadn't moved an inch, still sitting there with his head in his arms, and he had remained silent. All the kids were gathered around him, while worried for Brick, were also trying to deal with their own hard feelings. Buddy was trying to comfort Striker since he finally broke into tears, crying as he sat next to Brick. Even if Ani knew about Jill's death, she started crying herself, hugging Striker in the meantime while they cried together. Jack, in the meantime, was sitting with his back against the others, as he simply looked at his harmonica through teary eyes. Rudy sat bawling his eyes out.

Tails Doll and Shadow were also with Brick and the kids, and while the plushie was incapable of crying, he still looked down at the

ground with a solemn look. Shadow, however, only had his arms folded, whilst his teeth were gritted.

Milo looked at each of them sadly. In his mind, he was trying to figure out a possible way to fix everything. He had done so much research overnight...too much to go to waste right now... *She's not entirely gone yet...* he thought. *...but there must be some way...*

"...I can't believe Jill's...dead..." Boomer could only barely say that.

"...none of us can." Wiper uttered, as he glared down at the ground, letting out a small hiss, as he recalled a few words spoken to him weeks ago.

"I want you to keep an eye on her, report on anything unnatural regarding her, and ensure that she isn't, under any circumstances, critically injured. That is a mission priority."

Recalling those words now, Wiper held a hand in front of his eyes. *...I couldn't even help her, there...* he thought.

"...Wiper..." Both Newt and Natal looked at Wiper with concerned looks, both of them looking fairly devastated as well.

Hunter and Cal made it outside, and just as Hunter joined his comrades, Cal joined with Team Alpha, particularly Natal, setting a comforting hand on her shoulder.

...poor girl... Whisker thought, as he stood by Boomer, his own arms folded whilst he glanced towards the horizon.

The commander also looked at Wiper with a solemn look, before she closed her eyes. She wanted to offer her condolences, but even she knew that now, the atmosphere was too heavy.

As Hunter joined the Agents, he saw that they weren't doing too good, either. Miser was fighting back her tears as best she could, whilst a crying Ripper also tried comforting her. King and Queen, however, only looked away from the group with stern expressions; as if they couldn't bear to look at Miser and Ripper just yet.

Hunter would also notice that Lock was close by the agents, as he was merely watching them from a small distance. He didn't know Jill like they did, as he had never met her, but the thought that he had allowed something like this to happen to Goddess' daughter was enough to force him into silence.

Hunter wondered if he should tell them just how Jill died, but somehow he felt like it wouldn't have mattered. He too felt pretty solemn, and while looking at his own daughter crying with her friends, it hardened him even more. It almost seemed like all of this would never end...

...Until, "...Wait a minute! It doesn't have to be this way!"

All heads perked up, except Brick's head that is, and turned toward one individual standing all alone.

Milo.

"...Milo?" Ani uttered, looking up as she tried wiping her eyes.

Milo actually had a quite...positive look on him. "Jill isn't completely gone yet! Her soul can't pass on because it's still broken in two!"

"...broken in two?" King uttered, as he glanced at Milo. "...you mean... Callous?"

"...of course..." Wiper uttered, as he snapped his fingers. "Novagod created Callous using part of Jill's soul... if she died, chances are, she never got to reunite both parts."

Rudy looked at Milo in wondering. "...but...what does that mean?"

"Jill will never pass on to the great beyond if her soul is separated," Milo said, as he began to pace back and forth. "She needs Callous to willingly reunite back with her if she wants to pass on...but there's a loophole to it!"

"...explain," Boomer urged Milo.

"When a broken soul is pieced together again, it goes through a "re-birthing" process," Milo said. "It takes time in order to fully restore a

soul to its original state since it was broken up, and since both parts of the soul have entirely opposite personalities. Then, there are other things I've noticed. Jill's been able to heal using Purity...and Deity was able to bring back the dead, or create the "undead" using Corruption...it looks like Metal created a new energy with those two, as well as putting Chaos Energy into the mix, and thanks to that energy, it transformed him."

"...where are you going with this, Milo?" Hunter asked.

"Did you guys see what that energy did to Metal?" Milo questioned. "If it can turn Metal into that..."

Brick's head finally rose, with eyes as wide as could be. "...it might be powerful enough to bring Brownie back to life!" he finished.

"Right!" Milo said. "If Metal used that energy; powered by all seven Chaos Emeralds...it could be strong enough to properly bring Jill up from the dead, without horrible side effects!"

"...then what are we waiting for?" King called, as he looked at everybody. "Let's get that tin can outta bed, and get Jill back among the living!"

As he said that, however, Queen glanced towards the horizon, her vision narrowing. *...what is that sound?* she thought.

"Milo, couldn't we bring Jill back without Callous?" Ani asked, not having noticed Queen's behavior yet.

"No, we need a complete soul in order to bring her back to life," Milo said. "And..." Then he finally noticed Queen, and everyone else started looking over at her.

"...what's up Queen?" Hunter asked.

"...Miser." Queen uttered, as she stepped forward.

"...what is it, Queen?" Miser uttered, Queen's behavior worrying her.

"Get inside, and get your railgun. The rest of you, hide inside; we GUN agents can handle this."

"...handle what?" the commander uttered in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"...I hear something." Queen said bluntly, as she cracked her neck. "Something that's approaching, rapidly."

Brick immediately got up and took the kids toward the HQ. "C'mon," he said.

"But...but..." Ani hesitated, looking back at Hunter who gave her a nod, assuring that it was okay.

Miser nodded, as she began heading for the building. "Come on, everyone!" she called, as she held the door open for the others.

"...who is it that you're hearing, now?" King muttered, as he walked next to Queen, throwing her a glance.

"I can't tell; it sounds like a beast of sorts." Queen replied, as she kept looking ahead. "But... I get this chill down my spine, when I hear it."

"Something that creeps even Queen out? Kekekeke! That's creepy!" Ripper chimed in, as he walked next to King, looking towards the horizon.

"...you guys probably need a hand, don't you?" Wiper presumed, as he walked next to the group, looking ahead. "...never thought that I'd fight together with you guys again."

"It's certainly an honor, Wiper!" King laughed, as electricity sparked around him. "Bring it on, whatever it is!"

"We won't let it have a chance," Hunter growled, standing along with the other GUN agents just as everyone else made it inside the HQ.

For a few moments, nothing showed up, as the five GUN agents simply looked towards the horizon, Miser soon joining them with her railgun in tow. "...it comes!" Queen said, as she got ready for battle.

At that point, the skies began darkening, and now, everyone could hear what Queen had been hearing; a demonic roar.

Those inside the HQ squirmed to see out the windows at what it was, and hearing the roar made them all uneasy.

"Someone go get Sage," Brick said.

"...I'm on it." the commander nodded, as she quickly turned around, headed for the room Sage and Metal were in.

Soon, the six agents were able to see something flying towards them in a distance. "...keke? Is that a bat?" Ripper uttered, as he tilted his head.

"...Novagod's come for us, already?" Miser proposed, as she looked around her.

"...if that were the case, I doubt that he'd come flying at us like an animal." Wiper noted.

"...then who is it?" King growled, as his gaze narrowed.

Looking ahead, Queen suddenly gasped, as she got a better look at who it was that was approaching them; a pitch-black lion with massive wings protruding from his back, who let out another roar. "...that's... Johnny!"

Chapter 79

CHAPTER – SEVENTY-NINE

"No way!" Hunter uttered. "THAT'S Johnny?"

"Are you serious?" King uttered in shock, as he looked at Queen. "What happened to him?"

"...Corruption." Ripper uttered, as he glared at the incoming lion. "...his body... it's a slave to Corruption... kekekekeke..."

"...so it finally backfired on him, huh?" Wiper noted, as he hissed. "...if our luck is anything to count on, he's probably a lot stronger than the last time we fought."

"...so it seems..." Queen mused, as she closed her eyes. "...even so, we'll guard this place with our lives."

"I say it's time we finally took down Johnny for good," Hunter said.

Soon, all of them could see the fallen lion approach them, as he let loose another fierce roar.

"Take him down!" At that point, King aimed an arc of electricity at Johnny, sticking to him right off the bat. "Bring him out of the sky!"

"Roger!" Miser nodded, as she aimed her railgun at Johnny, before firing round after round, each strike blasting Johnny.

"Hunter, you help them provide backup." Queen said, as she, Ripper and Wiper began walking ahead of the group. "We'll take him on at close range."

"Got it," Hunter said with a nod. Then he looked back at the HQ. *We could also use Sage's help soon,* he thought.

As the lightning and railgun shots began bringing Johnny to the ground, Queen made the first move; dashing behind him, and reeling her fist back for a punch. Once Johnny was in range...

"YAAH!" Queen thrust her fist forward with a devastating force behind it, striking Johnny in the back, and propelling him towards Ripper and Wiper.

"Kekekekekeke! Time to cut him up!" Ripper cackled, as he leaped towards the incoming Johnny, slashing his blades at the lion. Once the mantis landed, Johnny didn't stop, but both of his arms had been sliced cleanly off his body.

And now... Wiper thought, as he pulled his arm back, keeping an eye on Johnny. Then, once he got close enough, Wiper suddenly thrust his arm forward, jabbing it right through Johnny's chest, piercing his heart.

Hunter watched in anticipation, but the Corruption he sensed from Johnny was off the charts. *I wonder how he became that way...* he thought.

Then, a scream of pain suddenly filled the air; however, not from Johnny, but Wiper, who quickly pulled his arm out of Johnny's body, holding it as if it were on fire. "...it feels like an inferno inside of him!"

"An inferno?" King uttered in shock, as Wiper slowly backed a bit away from Johnny, who merely looked at Wiper. Then, he let out another demonic roar, that actually pushed the cobra further back, cracking the earth around him.

"Wiper, hang on!" Hunter uttered, taking off running for them. He pulled out his dagger and threw it right at Johnny, aiming for the lion's forehead.

The dagger struck home, as Johnny actually recoiled from that blow. However, it proved futile, as the dagger actually sunk into Johnny's skull, vanishing from sight.

"...did he absorb the dagger?" Miser uttered.

"Let's see how he likes this!" Just then, King fired a storm of electricity at Johnny, absolutely electrifying him, though no damage seemed to be made to the lion. "...tsch... he's a tough one to crack!"

"This is crazy..." Hunter growled.

"And he hasn't even begun attacking us, yet..." Queen uttered, as they could only watch Johnny being electrocuted by King. However, after a few moments, a small shockwave was suddenly released from Johnny's body, actually dispelling King's electricity.

"...no way!" King uttered, as he glared at Johnny, who slowly drew his glance towards the tiger. "Just what happened to him?"

"KEKEKEKEKEKE!" Just then, Ripper leapt at Johnny, slashing his blades at the lion; however, Johnny simply turned away from the mantis, repelling the blades with his wings, of all things. "...kekeke?"

"...tsch..." Miser uttered, as she dropped her railgun. *...if we can't find a way to take him out... then...*

"... screw this," Hunter said, running after Johnny. Then with a mighty leap up, he threw his foot at Johnny's face.

Again, Hunter hit the lion head-on, causing him to step back once more. However, it only served to enrage Johnny, as he slowly opened his mouth, dark energies building up within it.

"HUNTER!" Quickly, Miser pushed Hunter out of the way, before she pressed her hands against Johnny's mouth, actually preventing him from unleashing any attack; however, one could see that this was tearing on the rhino. "...kkh... I won't let you kill my friends...!" she snarled, keeping Johnny at bay as best she could.

Just then, Sage emerged from the HQ, as she saw what was going on. Just as she laid eyes on Johnny, however, she gasped in surprise. "...I don't believe it." she uttered.

"Miser!" Hunter knew she was immortal, but she still didn't deserve to put herself in front of such an attack.

"...guys!" Sage suddenly called, which made everyone but Miser look towards her. "I... I can read his thoughts!"

"...SAY WHAT?" King yelled, as he looked at Sage in astonishment. "What about those mental implants? Aren't they keeping you from

reading him?"

"...maybe..." Wiper uttered, as he looked back at Miser and Johnny, both of them still locked in a power struggle. "...the Corruption corroded the implants, making him susceptible to Sage's powers, again.

"Hot damn, we might have a chance after all!" Hunter said.

"...then I suppose it's time to let him have it!" Sage said, as her entire body began glowing with a psychic aura, her eyes glaring at Johnny. Slowly, the group could hear a humming noise coming from within the lion, as something seemed to be expanding. "Alright, someone get Miser away from there; I'm just about ready to let Johnny join Bloom and Gloom!"

Hunter raised his own hand, and thanks to his telekinesis, he pulled Miser away quickly and easily.

In that instant, as Johnny was about to let loose a roar, his entire body exploded, black goo splattering just about everywhere, and nothing hit any of the agents; luckily for them too, as once the goo hit the ground, they could see steam rising up from it.

"...he's..." Miser uttered, as she collapsed to her knees. "...he's... really dead?"

Hunter kept silent. He didn't want to jump to conclusion too quickly, just in case things weren't what they seemed...

For a while, nothing happened, and it seemed like Johnny truly was defeated. However, that peace would not last; slowly, the globs of Corruption began huddling together into one larger puddle of Corruption, until eventually, no small globs remained.

"...n-no way..." Miser uttered in shock. "...he survived that..."

Slowly, but surely, rising out from the puddle of Corruption, was Johnny, with both of his arms now returned to their rightful place. However, even though he was rejuvenated, he only looked at the group, without moving a muscle.

"I figured as much," Hunter growled.

"...even with Sage backing us up..." Wiper growled, as he glared at Johnny, who still didn't move. "...we... can't win."

"...this isn't fun anymore." Johnny suddenly uttered, his voice carrying a demonic tone to it. *"...not when she isn't here to enjoy it..."*

"...did he just talk?" King said in surprise, as he glared at the lion.

"..she..." Hunter made a connection. "...you're talking about Callous." And then, it hit him, after remembering what Sage said; how Jill killed herself and took Callous with her.

"...yeah." Johnny nodded, as he glared at Wiper. *"...if she's not here... I can't enjoy this. Not one bit."* With a low growl, he turned around, before he began walking away. *"...but I'll bring her back."* he added, without looking at the group. *"...and when I do... we'll come back, and kill you all."*

"...comforting...very comforting," Hunter murmured to himself, folding his arms as he watched Johnny leave.

After walking for a small distance, Johnny eventually took to the skies, flying away from the scene.

"...his thoughts..." Sage uttered, as she folded her arms. "...before I blew him apart, there was only one coherent sentence I could make out from the mess his head was then."

"...and what was that?" Queen inquired, as she looked at the raven.

"...kill me." Sage responded, as she looked down at the ground. "Over and over, all he could think of was for someone to kill him... as if that existence was too much for him to bear."

Hunter blinked. "...are you telling me that Johnny is actually grieving over Callous?" Well, not like what Johnny said wouldn't indicate that, but still.

"...that would explain why he refrained from killing us all, just now..."

Sage muttered, as she glanced up at the sky, where Johnny had become a mere dot on the horizon. "...who would have thought that he'd actually feel compassion for someone..."

"...someone who's just as twisted as he is." Wiper scoffed, as he folded his arms. "If he could show that kind of compassion to anyone, I'm pretty sure that Sprinter, Bliss and Desperado wouldn't be dead."

"Damn straight," Hunter remarked to Wiper. Then he looked at the raven. "Sage, how is Metal doing?" he asked.

"...no improvement, yet." Sage said, as she glanced at Hunter. "But... he did let me know about what he planned to use against Novagod."

"Kekekeke?" Ripper uttered, as he tilted his head. "What would that be?"

"Let me explain..." Sage began, as she told the agents of what she had found out.

Jill was totally speechless after what she saw. First off...when Milo said that they could bring her back to life, it totally blew her mind away. Then seeing how Johnny acted was another baffling thing. She looked over at Callous, who was just as speechless as she was. The two ended up looking at each other, in silence.

Then Callous' look turned into a cold glare at Jill.

"...I still can't believe it." Sprinter uttered. "Johnny... managed to regain control over his body."

"...like, either he's really lucky..." Bliss began, as she folded her arms. "...or he's, like, a prodigy when it comes to Corruption."

"This Corruption stuff is still beyond me," Desperado said, shaking his head.

Jill didn't like the cold stare Callous was giving her, so she opened

her mouth to speak. "Callous, I..." and she stopped, just as Callous turned her nose up grudgingly.

"...jeez, like, lighten up, will ya?" Bliss chimed in, as she shot Callous a glance. "You can't, like, keep blaming her for whatever Johnny's up to."

"Actually, I can," Callous said back, turning away to sit alone at one of the pews. "And I don't blame her for what Johnny's up to...I blame her for the fact that everyone thinks I don't have a right to exist..."

"...well, don't you?" Desperado.

Callous shrugged. "Yes, I don't really have the right to exist...but I was willing to fight for it..."

Jill looked sternly at Callous. "...don't blame me Callous. If anyone is really to blame for your problems, it should be Deity."

That made Callous' eyes open wide at that kind of remark.

Jill continued. "He created you, only to terrorize me and nothing else. He didn't have very much ambition for you, so you never really had much freedom to start out with."

"...again with this Deity fellow." Bliss said, as she let out a sigh. "Just who does he, like, think he is, anyway?"

"...to be honest," Jill said. "I don't know...he's tormented and tortured me for a long time, so he's obviously very sick...but he can't feel any emotion whatsoever, so his main motives for why he does what he does is beyond me..."

"...man..." Bliss muttered, before she looked away. "...like, pardon my language... but that guy sounds like an asshole."

Looking at the swirl, Sprinter was keeping his focus on Johnny, who was still flying through the sky. *...doesn't he have a goal in mind?* he thought.

Jill turned aside to herself, while something occurred to her thoughts. *If I'm dead...then where are the spirits of Sonic and his*

friends? she wondered. *Wouldn't they be right here with me?*

"What's up now?" Desperado asked.

Jill looked back at him. "You guys know Sonic the Hedgehog, right?"

"Like, who doesn't? He's a legend." Bliss said, as she looked at Jill with a nod. "Why do you ask?"

Jill turned to herself again, faced away from everyone. "...a few weeks ago, the spirits of him and his friends contacted me," she said. "And since then...they've been talking to me."

Desperado had a positively dumbfounded look. "...you're kidding..."

"She isn't joking," Callous confirmed.

"...so you're, like, wondering where they are, right?" Bliss presumed. "...well, as far as I know, we're, like, the only ones here."

"...it may be a far cry..." Sprinter noted, as he rubbed his chin. "...but perhaps we could locate them with this?"

Jill looked back at Sprinter with a hopeful look. "Do you think it's possible to do that?"

"I have no idea..." Sprinter shrugged. "...but we won't know until we try it out."

Jill came over to the swirl above Sprinter's palm. "Then go ahead and try it," she said.

"This aught to be interesting," Desperado said, joining next to Jill near the swirl.

Nodding, Sprinter began focusing intensely on the swirl, as the viewpoint began moving across the world again, searching just about every corner for any sign regarding Sonic the Hedgehog. The viewpoint took to the skies in a sea of clouds for some reason, and then directed right at the sun, being blinded in a flash of light. It stayed that way for a minute.

Then, "...what? Who's this?"

Jill jumped when she heard that voice. "Sonic?"

"...Jill?" the voice responded, indeed making out to be the voice of Sonic the Hedgehog. The viewpoint remained nothing but bright light, but somehow there was established communication through it.

"...like, is that really Sonic the Hedgehog?" Bliss yelped in surprise. "Like, ohmygosh, I, like, never thought I'd be able to talk to a legend like him!"

"...well, I never expected that anyone could see us, here..." Sprinter mused, before closing his eyes. "...then again, he is a spirit, so who am I to complain?"

"Heh, I see you picked up some new friends even in the spirit world, Jill," Sonic chuckled. "Well, besides us anyway..."

"I wouldn't say all of them were friends," Callous remarked.

"Ah, sounds like Callous is there too," Sonic said, though he had an amused tone. "So Callous, I hope you learned your lesson about what happens when you can't play nice with others," he chuckled teasingly, offending Callous and making her turn away.

"Sonic, how come you or your friends weren't here with me when I died?" Jill asked.

"Well, 'cause when you entered into Angel Island, it kinda booted us out," Sonic answered sheepishly. "That storm's real nasty to us ghosts, you see...and since you died in Angel Island, you're stuck within it; I'm still amazed you got the reception to reach us though."

"If you say that the storm around Angel Island affects spirits...then..." Jill looked at everyone present, and puzzledly turned back to the swirl. "...how come we're all fine?"

"Eh, not quite sure of that myself," Sonic said. "The whole hypothesis thing was always Tails' specialty...but I'm guessing that it doesn't affect you somehow, and since those other guys with you are close to ya, they are kinda protected by you or by whatever force

keeps the storm from hurting you. It could've been that Purity, but then again I could be wrong."

"...man, all this talk about these forces..." Bliss uttered, as she rubbed her head. "Like, it's a real headache."

"Well, at least we got someone to talk to..." Sprinter hummed, as he closed his eyes. "He might not have all the answers, but it's better than nothing."

"...so where are you and the rest now?" Jill asked.

"Just back in the Special Zone where we're the safest we'll get...away from Dracula-wannabe," Sonic grumbled. "We're just waiting now."

"For what?" Desperado said, making Sonic chuckle.

"Hey now, I can't spoil it," Sonic said. "Besides, you'll find out soon enough, heheh..."

"...Metal was right; you guys are way too cryptic," Jill said, shaking her head.

"Why not? Keeps the excitement going," Sonic continued. "I mean, give us a break, we've been dead and stuck in limbo for a little more than 50 years-"

"Oh please, Sonic," another voice suddenly said, which Jill recognized as Amy's. "That still doesn't give you the excuse to mess with the poor souls."

"Hush Ames," Sonic murmured.

"Look, instead of arguing, don't you have something better to do?" Callous said. "Like, oh I don't know...guiding that hopeless, broken down meat-bag that used to be a rust-bucket?"

"For such a sharp tongue, you're right," Sonic said.

"Like, you don't need to put it like that..." Bliss muttered, as she shot Callous a glare.

"Do you think you'll be able to wake him?" Sprinter inquired, as he looked at the swirl with a curious look.

"Could try," Sonic said. "He just needs some proper motivation is all. When he finds out about bringing Jill back to life, I'm sure he'll jump right on his feet."

"You knew about that?" Desperado asked suspiciously.

"We're just as capable of watching everything like you guys are," Sonic said. "...still, that's really the first time I've seen Metal act like that. It's weird for sure...but I feel pretty sorry for the guy. I'll tell him you said hi, Jill."

"Wait, Sonic..." but Jill didn't stop him in time, because the light faded from the swirl and it became a planetary view again.

"...hm." Sprinter hummed, as he began focusing on the swirl once more. "...we'll have to trust Sonic, for the time being..."

"...like, I'm curious about something..." Bliss muttered, as she glanced at Sprinter. "...do you think we could, like, use that swirl to, like, keep an eye on Novagod?"

Both Jill and Callous' heads rose in reaction to that, looking at Bliss. "...that's not a bad idea, Bliss," Jill said.

"Actually, I'm not so sure about that," Callous cut in. "Daddy's so shrewd with Corruption its scary. He can inflict pain on souls, torture them, absorb them...even yank them out of living beings to use their bodies as puppets...he might sense us watching him and immediately figure out where we are..."

Jill blinked while looking back at Callous. "I never even thought of that..."

"Still, like..." Bliss muttered, as she rubbed her chin. "...I'm still curious."

"...well, let's have a brief look." Sprinter shrugged, as the viewpoint went down towards the earth. "If it's only for a few seconds..." As the viewpoint moved, however, they eventually realized that its path was

coinciding with another being's path.

Johnny's.

"...Sprinter, why are we, like, following Johnny around?" Bliss uttered.

"Somehow..." Sprinter mused, as he tilted his head. "...I think we're both on the same path."

"...Johnny's going after Deity, isn't he?" Jill supposed.

"That would make the most sense," Desperado said.

"...then maybe we should watch...just a little bit," Callous muttered, although this sort of thing greatly absorbed her focus.

As the viewpoint kept following Johnny, eventually, the group saw that the lion was heading for a large storm someplace above the ocean. "...so, Deity's in there?" Sprinter assumed.

"...that storm..." Jill knew she had seen it before, seeing as it had loomed over the woods they were training in; even struck her down with lightning. Thinking of the sight she saw, she wondered in thought, *...was that really where Deity was?* And while seeing Johnny disappear within the clouds, she knew her answer would come soon enough.

Deity Novagod was...actually sitting in a quiet, dark room isolated away from everyone. His eyes were closed, perhaps because he was meditating. Now that Jill and Callous were gone and out of his way, he ought to hunt down Metal Sonic and exterminate him as well, to ensure that truly no one could stop him.

Something else suddenly broke him of his thoughts, right as he simply opened his eyes. "Hm...it seems another guest is approaching," he murmured to himself, and sensing the levels of Corruption far away... "...interesting." He stood up from his chair and entered outside onto a personal balcony of his, looking out from the tall tower of the castle into the ominous black storm that basked the

castle in darkness.

As dark thunderclaps boomed around the castle, a loud, monstrous roar filled the sky, as a dark figure shot from the clouds, flying towards Deity.

While Deity remained completely calm, some of the gargoyles flying around the air started charging after the dark figure in alert in order to get rid of it.

However, the dark figure easily moved around the gargoyles, still keeping on a straight path towards the vampire.

"...hm, he seeks my blood this time," Deity said under his breath. "The time would've come sooner or later...perhaps it would be the opportune moment to get rid of him as well."

Soon, the dark creature stopped right in front of Deity, letting the vampire see the monster that Corruption had turned Johnny into. *"...I need to talk with you."* he said, as he perched himself on the balcony railing, his pupil-less eyes staring at Deity.

"Very well," Deity said. "Speak."

"...how do I recreate Callous?" Johnny uttered, as he folded his arms. *"As the one who first made her... you should know."*

"Do you wish to know? The truth could be disappointing," Deity said.

"...what do you mean by that?" Johnny growled.

"To create a being like her, with such free will and independent capabilities, you simply cannot conjure them up with Corruption," Deity answered. "Callous was manufactured from something that already existed, and without that certain thing, she cannot come to exist again...unfortunately, that very thing is also out of your reach."

Blinking, Johnny let out a low growl. *"...you mean Jill?"* he uttered.

"Indeed," Deity said, nodding. "After all, it took half of her own soul to create Callous...and even then, Callous was really just parts of Jillian herself, distorted and tainted with Corruption."

"...so, I need her body to bring Callous back, is what you're saying." Johnny deduced, as he scoffed. *"...great... and without a Chaos Emerald, I can't get to Angel Island..."*

" To be honest, you shouldn't bother with it Johnny," Deity said, turning around to enter back into the castle. "Reviving her will only hinder you further if something unexpected happened to her again..."

The moment Deity turned around, however, Johnny made his move. Lunging from where he was perched, Johnny aimed to pierce right through Deity's torso with one single punch. Deity became still, and slowly looked down at the fist that popped out the front of his torso from inside.

"...say, Deity... I've been wondering..." Johnny uttered, as he let out a feral snarl. *"...how did you manage to escape from Angel Island? Was it someone special you absorbed?"* As he said that, he suddenly punched his other hand right through Deity as well.

Deity actually let out a painful grunt as he felt the other hand dig into him. "...it was Goddess, Johnny," he uttered, somehow without losing composure. "Once she gave up her soul, I became more powerful..."

"Oh, really?" Johnny chuckled, as he licked his lips. *"Then... what would happen if someone happened to... take her away?"* In a sense of irony, Johnny suddenly dug his fangs into Deity's neck.

This time, Deity literally winced as Johnny's teeth pierced his cold skin, and he couldn't really move away with Johnny's fists through his middle. Chuckling, Johnny actually began sucking energy out of the vampire, including spirits that the vampire had collected. With the amount of consumption Johnny did, Deity lost energy rapidly and couldn't fight it back, so all he could do was allow it to happen...

After a while, Johnny stopped absorbing energy from the vampire, as he glanced at the bat with a grin. *"...well? Did I get her?"* he said with a wicked smile.

"Yes, you did," Deity answered briefly, while panting for breath. It was actually doing something to him, although it didn't surprise him in the least.

"Good, good..." Johnny chuckled, as he licked his lips again. *"...but it's not enough. I need more..."* Then, with a grin, he sank his teeth into Deity's neck once more, keeping on absorbing his energy. Deity grit his teeth to keep from uttering anything from the drain of energy as he allowed it to happen...

"You oughta be dry, soon..." Johnny chuckled, without letting up for a second. *"...so? How does it feel?"*

If looks could kill. One look at Deity and one could see that the youth itself was taken away from the bat, and massive wrinkles had appeared all over him like he was a prune. He was also very weak, and probably couldn't hold himself up with his own legs any longer, but even then, all he said was, "I wouldn't know...for I cannot feel."

"...heh." Johnny chuckled, as he kept draining Deity. *"I think this finally clinches it... I* am *stronger than you."*

Deity said nothing, but in his mind, one more thought crossed his mind before he fell on his knees finally, emitting a black smoke from himself indicating that he was withering away. *...that is only what you think, Johnny...* Then he collapsed, and the black smoke coming off of him was automatically inhaled through Johnny's nostrils and throat, while the bat deteriorated away and vanished.

Looking down at where Deity had been, Johnny began chuckling, before breaking into a mad laughter. *"How the mighty have fallen!"* he cackled, before he spun around, glancing around him. *"...but why stop there? Everything in this area must have been created by* Corruption *... I think I'll go right ahead and take it for my own!"*

As he said that, he generated a ball of Corruption in his hand, which he threw up in the air. Once it reached a certain height, it began expanding at a rapid rate, black lightning bolts crackling around it, as it began pulling in all the Corruption in the area that wasn't already in Johnny's possession.

"Well I have to admit, watching Johnny do that was pretty disturbing, even for him," Desperado said, folding his arms.

Jill took a deep breath. Things were getting out of hand here, and she was only trying to remain calm. Looking over at Callous, she saw that her evil counterpart had turned away from the swirl, not wanting to watch what was becoming of Johnny. There was no other expression than a hardened scowl, which was trying to suppress the numerous other things she felt right now.

"...I didn't want this for him," Callous finally muttered. "I didn't want him to become just another Deity Novagod."

Jill raised her eyebrow in wondering, "Whatever happened to calling him 'Daddy?'"

"I don't care to call him that anymore," Callous growled.

"...well, I suppose that's karma." Sprinter hummed, as he sighed. "...though, I have to wonder what he's planning to do with the power he's absorbed."

"I think he's, like, still wanting to bring Callous back..." Bliss presumed, as she tapped her chin in thought.

"Deity said he's gonna need me to do it," Jill said. "...but I don't get it...Milo said my soul was still split in half. Why would Johnny still need to use me? Wouldn't Deity have known that...?"

"...something's fishy here," Desperado said.

"...guys, I just got a creepy thought..." Bliss uttered with a shudder.

"...what?" Sprinter hummed, as he glanced at the sheep.

"Like... what if he needs to merge the bodies together with Corruption, or something?" Bliss said, before shaking her head. "Ugh, that's, like, totally icky to think about!"

Jill and Callous' eyes widened. "...what?" Jill uttered.

"...so you're saying, he could do the same thing as what Milo said to do," Callous said. "Only that I am revived rather than Jill..." she closed her eyes to think about it.

Jill looked worriedly at Callous. "...either way, our souls are required to finally join together again..." Jill said.

"...so it's going to be a race against time..." Sprinter muttered. "Jill's friends against Johnny... I wonder just who will triumph."

"I'm, like, rooting for Jill's friends!" Bliss chimed in, as she folded her arms.

"...In the end, it's ultimately my decision whether or not our souls merge, correct?" Callous asked Jill, getting a nod from her. "I could decide that we could even be stuck in limbo rather than brought back to life?" She got another nod from Jill.

"Though if you decide on that..." Sprinter noted, as he looked back at the swirl. "...Johnny would become a significant threat to the whole world."

Callous chuckled, "Not that I didn't want Johnny to terrorize others..." Then she softened, "...but he really has gone too far..."

"...uh, guys?" Desperado suddenly said, looking at one part of the chapel. "I didn't remember seeing doors in here...so why do I see some?"

"Huh?" When Jill looked, she discovered that Desperado was right, and she saw those familiar double doors clearly. Without warning, the doors popped out and opened to indistinguishable darkness. Just as soon as a figure stepped inside the chapel and fell to their knees in exhaustion, the doors shut tightly, and vanished into thin air.

Looking at this figure greatly surprised Jill, for she recognized who it was.

"Whew...quite a storm out there..." uttered a certain red echidna as he tried to get to his feet, and dust himself off.

"...is... that..." Sprinter uttered in surprise.

"...like, no way! Here, of all places?" Bliss said in an even more surprised tone.

"...Knuckles?" Jill blurted, catching a glimpse from the echidna.

"Took me awhile to find you," he said casually, like nothing was going on. "Chaos brought both your bodies to me, and thankfully let me out of that disgusting body I was placed in."

"...Wait a minute, what are you talking about?" Callous asked, standing up from where she sat on the pew.

"Sonic and the others didn't know, but when Goddess came to give up her soul, she managed to do one thing," Knuckles said. "And that was pulling me out of Deity and quickly putting me back in my body, the one that creepy vampire was controlling at the time. All in the last minute too..."

"...my mother...did that?" Jill spoke in disbelief.

"Yep," Knuckles answered.

"...well, I suppose we should fill you in on what has happened, Knuckles..." Sprinter muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...for one thing, Deity Novagod is no more."

"Is that so?" somehow, Knuckles didn't sound very surprised, which was weird. "I'm guessing Johnny took him down after Callous died?"

"...were you watching the battle?" Jill supposed.

"Yeah, and you guys just didn't see me," Knuckles said. "I'm sure Callous sensed me but she didn't say anything," and Callous actually turned aside, proving that was the case.

"...in any case..." Sprinter muttered, as he glanced back at the swirl. "...right now, Johnny poses a serious threat to the entire world... and he's definitely going to try and resurrect Callous."

"Sounds bad," Knuckles said, but once again tone of voice nor facial

expression emphasized that he was concerned. He was pretty cool-headed. "What about your friends, Jill?" he asked.

"...Metal, he..." Jill tried to find the words to say. "...he took my death pretty hard, and so did my friends, but he took it so hard that the emotions he felt caused him to...turn into something else..."

"Go on," Knuckles said.

"...he turned into a living, breathing, organic Mobian," Jill said.

"I see," Knuckles said, rubbing his chin. Again, no hint of surprise or shock, or anything.

"...and Milo finally figured out a way that could bring me back to life," she finished.

"...so Johnny and your friends are going to fight over who to bring back to life probably," Knuckles said. Then he shook his head in pity. "And I thought the things that happened to us were bad..."

"Like, I doubt that Johnny's gonna bother mincing words..." Bliss uttered, as she rubbed her chin. "...and the sad thing is, like, the only one alive who can match him is Metal, and he's, like, pretty much out of it at the moment..."

"And I assume Sonic is trying to assess the situation," Knuckles figured, taking a seat on one of the pews to settle in.

"We just got in contact with him," Jill said. "He said he'd try to guide Metal, and maybe snap him out of it."

"And all you guys can do is watch, huh?" Knuckles asked, getting nods from everyone. Then he stretched his arms and sat back.

"...why are you so relaxed?" Callous asked suspiciously.

"Dunno," he answered.

"...I'm going to sound hypocritical while saying this..." Sprinter muttered, as he looked back at the swirl. "...but spirits are too cryptic."

"...we should check back on my friends," Jill said.

Chapter 80

CHAPTER – EIGHTY

Milo and the other kids were in the guest room, all of them looking at the hedgehog in bed with amazed looks.

"It's hard to think that's really Metal," Striker said, with Buddy sitting on his head and adding his own input, "Chao."

"I wonder how long he'll be like that," Rudy murmured.

"Probably until Metal decides he wants to change back, and sets out to look for a way to do that," Ani supposed.

"I'm afraid it isn't going to be that easy." At that point, Sage walked into the room, glancing at Metal.

"...why not?" Jack inquired, looking at raven with a curious look.

"The first thing I found out while reading his mind..." Sage uttered, as she sat down on a stool. "...was that even when he collapsed, he tried using that nanite technology of his to return to his Neo form. However, it simply didn't work."

"...so he can't change back?" Jack uttered, as he looked back at Metal again.

"...it's permanent?" Milo asked in more amazement.

"Well, to be fair, he hasn't been in that form for too long, so who can really say?" Sage hummed. "...still, to think that he was prepared to let that force destroy his body, if only to be able to take out Novagod..."

As the kids fell silent and looked at Metal again, Milo sensed something about him that was occurring, but he didn't say anything about it.

"...Metal, hey, ya in here?" called a voice in the deep recesses of

Metal's mind.

...Sonic? Metal thought, as he turned in his bed. *...leave me...*

"Hey, c'mon," Sonic said. *"I have some pretty good news..."*

...I doubt that... Metal thought.

At this point, however, Sage glanced towards Metal. "...hm?"

"So...you're saying that a possibility of bringing Jill back to life isn't good news?" Sonic chuckled.

...what did you say? Metal thought.

"Excuse me, but who's there?" Sage called, as she approached Metal, before placing her hands against his head. "I couldn't help but overhear you."

"Ah, hiya Sage," Sonic suddenly said cheerfully. *"Go ahead. Tell Metal that Milo figured out a way to bring Jill back from the dead."*

...what are you... Metal thought.

"Sage?" Jack uttered, as he glanced at the raven. "What's wrong?"

However, Sage didn't answer him; right now, she entered Metal's mind, and found herself in a dark-red area, with her as the only one around.

Well, at first glance, at least. "Sonic the Hedgehog... mind showing yourself?" she said, as she looked around her.

Instantly, the blue hedgehog appeared in the void with a casual wave, "Yo."

"This is pretty unorthodox..." Sage hummed, as she folded her arms. "...but I shouldn't question it too much. Right now, we have to help Metal out."

"Right," Sonic said. "So tell him, Sage. Tell Metal about what Milo said."

"First, let's go to him." Sage said, as she glanced behind Sonic. "He's just over there."

As Sonic glanced behind him, he'd saw what appeared to be a massive, hi-tech fortress, with flashing neon lights and intricate defense turrets lined all over it. The door leading in, thankfully, was fully open.

"Well, this isn't the first weirdest thing I've seen," Sonic murmured to himself, just as he approached the open door.

As he and Sage walked through it, however, there was absolutely nothing on the other side; just more of the same, dark-red void. "...appearances are deceiving." Sage hummed, as she glanced upwards; as it turned out, the whole fort was nothing more than a cardboard cutout.

"Yeah, no kidding," Sonic remarked, as he started looking around to see if he could find Metal.

Thankfully, they didn't need to look for long, as they could see someone in the distance, sitting with his head buried in his knees; a blue hedgehog. "There he is." Sage noted, as she began walking towards the hedgehog.

"Heh...spittin' image," Sonic chuckled in remark to Metal's new appearance. Then he followed Sage to Metal's side.

"...hey, Metal." Sage said once the two got to the Metallix. "It's me, again... and Sonic, too."

"...I could see that." Metal muttered, without bothering to look at either of them.

"I'm guessing you heard me from before, right?" Sonic asked.

"...yes." Metal nodded. "...but it's not possible. You can't just have people come back from the dead; it's illogical."

"I suppose you should tell Shadow that, then." Sage muttered, which actually made Metal glance up at her.

"According to Milo, it's possible," Sonic said. "All you need is those 7 emeralds, which could create a strong enough force of Unity that might be able to bring her back..."

"...hmph..." Metal scoffed, before he looked away from the two again. "...if that's the case, go right ahead. The rest of the emeralds are in Metropolis, so-"

"That's the thing, though..." Sage shot in, as she folded her arms. "...the only one in the entire world who can manipulate Unity... is you, Metal. If we want this to work, we'll need your help."

"Not to mention you've got only a matter of time to do it, too," Sonic added. "Johnny's gone ballistic and he's looking for a way to revive Callous."

Blinking, Metal glanced at Sonic. "...that can't be right. I killed him."

"Apparently, you didn't kill him enough; he was literally at our doorstep not too long ago." Sage noted, before she folded her arms. "Now, let's get you up on your feet, shall we?"

However, after she said that, Metal buried his face in his knees again. "...even if I'm the only one who can bring her back... how can I face her? Because of me, she..."

"Hey, Metal, I can understand..." Sonic said. "...but you've got to. Besides, would you rather live with the fact she died for you, or would you rather make things right?"

"...I..." Metal uttered, as he closed his eyes. "...on one condition."

Blinking, Sage tilted her head. "...hm?"

"...I need to use Unity at that ritual, right?" Metal said. "Until it starts, I need time to think... so I'll need someone to carry me to wherever the ritual's being held."

"Well, what do you think Sage?" Sonic asked, since this kind of question wasn't really up to him.

"...I see." Sage muttered, before nodding. "We'll get someone to

carry you, no problem."

"...thank you." Metal muttered. "Now... please leave me. I need to think..."

"Alright then, just holler if you need me," Sonic said, and instantly vanished after that.

Nodding, Sage looked down at Metal. "...hang in there." she said, before vanishing as well.

That left Metal alone in the void, as he looked upwards with a look of disdain. "...after I've brought her back... just what do I do...?" he muttered.

At that point, Sage finally let go of Metal's head, letting out a sigh of relief. "...we're in business." she said.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Rudy asked, tilting his head.

"I had a little talk with Metal..." Sage began, as she glanced at the kids. "...and in exchange for a ride to our destination, he's going to help us bring Jill back to life."

"...really?" Jack said in awe.

"That's...good," Milo said, letting out his own sigh of relief. "...we'll need to go to Angel Island in order to get it done. If Jill had died there, then her soul is still trapped on that island," he said.

"Metal said that the Chaos Emeralds, aside from the green one, are in Metropolis." Sage said, as she began walking out of the room. "With them, we'll get her back for sure!"

"Sounds like all we have to do is get them!" Rudy said optimistically.

"Proxy could probably get them in no time flat!" Jack laughed. "He'd just go CHAOS CONTROL! And then we'd have all the emeralds!"

"We'd better hurry and go tell him then," Milo said, leaving out the room with the lot of them following him closely.

Soon, the kids encountered Shadow, who was simply sitting in a chair, observing the green Chaos Emerald. "Hey, Proxy!" Jack called, as he waved to the android. "We found out that the other Chaos Emeralds are in Metropolis!"

"...Metropolis, hm?" Shadow hummed, as he glanced at the kids.

"Yep, just the other 6 Chaos Emeralds," Milo said. "And since there's one here...would you be able to use Chaos Control to get back the rest of the emeralds?"

"...naturally." Shadow nodded. "It won't take too long, really. If you want, I can go right away."

"Yes!" Ani said. "Please!"

"...alright." Shadow nodded, before he looked at the emerald again. "...I'll be back as soon as possible. Chaos Control!" Then, he vanished.

Meanwhile, Cal was walking through the halls and he finally reached the room where the GUN commander was sitting. By then, he stopped before her with a greeting nod. "Are you the commander of GUN?" he asked.

"...that would be me." the commander nodded, as she took out a cigarette, placing it between her lips, as she lit it. "What can I help you with?"

"...I was wondering if..." Cal scratched his head, wondering the right way to ask. "...if I could become a solder in GUN."

"Say what?" Boomer had swung around the corner just then, and having heard what Cal asked, was stupefied.

"...that is pretty sudden." the commander hummed, as she took a drag from her cigarette. "...what are your qualifications?"

"Half my body is cybernetic, so my respiratory system and endurance is faultless," Cal said, although he had quite a time trying to think of the other ones. "...I have training in using dual-katanas..." Then he looked up at her. "I'm not really quite sure...what are you

looking for in terms of qualifications?"

"Basically, I need to figure out what you excel at." the commander shrugged. "Do you specialize in combat, recon or tactical abilities?"

Combat usually failed miserably, but tactical seemed too low of a standard. "...recon," Cal finally said. After all, he did have cloaking.

"Commander, I'd also like to qualify for GUN," Boomer said, while glaring at Cal. "And I specialize in combat."

Glancing at Boomer, the commander took another drag from her cigarette. "...you too, huh?" she hummed, before tapping her chin. "...well, under normal circumstances, I'd have both of you undergo some form of test regarding your field of expertise, so we'd see if you'd qualify." Then, she shrugged. "But the circumstances certainly aren't normal, so... go speak with Agent Wiper. I'm sure he'll find some way to see if you qualify."

Cal looked back at Boomer then. "Boomer, I know you really wanted to be in GUN, but...what about the Chaotix?"

"Captain already knew it would happen at some point or another," Boomer replied, turning around and walking away. "I suppose I should talk to him, you're right...but I've made up my mind a long time ago..." and then she was gone.

"...hm... determined, isn't she?" the commander hummed, casting a glance at Cal. "Well, I shouldn't take up more of your time. Go and see Agent Wiper."

"...alright then," Cal said. Then he gave the commander another nod. "Thanks commander." With that, he left the room in hopes to find Wiper.

It took him a short while, but soon enough, he found not only Wiper, but the rest of Team Alpha inspecting their equipment. Natal was the first to notice the monkey, as she waved to him. "Hi, Cal." she said.

"...Calculate." Wiper muttered with a nod to him; Newt, on the other hand, simply looked away from him, without a word.

"Hey," he said with a small wave, and acknowledged Natal with a half-smile. Afterward he straightened up and looked at Wiper. "I've been talking to the commander...and I wanted to know if I could apply for GUN," he said. "So she directed me to you and your judgment on that account."

"...say what?" Newt uttered, as he suddenly glanced at Cal. "You're joinin' GUN?"

"...any specific reason for that, Calculate?" Wiper hummed, as he raised an eyebrow.

"I have nothing out there for me...especially after all that's happened," Cal said. "And possibly time in GUN could set me straight...after all, I've made quite a lot of stupid mistakes, and I've been kinda...lost."

"...I see..." Wiper muttered, as he glanced at Natal, who was busy making sure that her nodachi's edge wasn't dulled; however, he could swear that he saw her smiling just a bit. "...and she sent you to me for some evaluation process?" Sighing, the cobra rubbed the back of his head. "...hrm..."

"Oh, I see. Try and beat me to the chase, have you?" Boomer said, coming in and leaning against the wall. Even if she could tell Wiper was thinking, she didn't mean to interrupt. "I assume Cal's told you, so I was sent for the same thing. I want to join GUN too."

Hearing that, Newt suddenly perked up. "...really?" he uttered.

"...you too, huh?" Wiper chuckled, before he hissed. "Looks like you were interested, after all..." Then, he snapped his fingers. "Alright, just to clarify; what are your fields of expertise?"

"Recon," Cal said.

"Combat," Boomer answered confidently.

"...then I think it's obvious what needs to be done." Wiper nodded, before he nodded towards Newt and Natal. "Simply put, you two fight these two."

"...say what?" Boomer muttered with widened eyes, while Cal looked at them in wondering and astonishment.

Standing up, Wiper folded his arms. "I told you; you two fight these two."

"...how do you want the fights set up, Wiper?" Natal inquired, as she glanced at the cobra, who hissed once more.

"Opposites." Wiper replied, as he pointed towards Newt. "Which means that while Cal fights against Newt, Team Alpha's combat expert..." Then, he pointed towards Natal. "...Boomer fights against Natal, Team Alpha's recon expert."

"...interesting setup," Cal murmured, while looking at Newt blankly.

"Alright; just to keep it fair, and to prevent serious injuries, you won't use anything aside from your body to fight." Wiper said, as he gave Cal and Boomer a nod. "That means no swords, no guns, nothing aside from your fists and feet."

"Up front and personal, eh?" Boomer said. "And what determines whether or not we're worthy of GUN?"

"Look, we've known each other for a while, so I know what you two can do, already..." Wiper muttered, as he rubbed his neck. "...but it's simple GUN procedure to have some test for new recruits. So... just last against Newt and Natal, and consider yourselves members."

"We should probably take this outside, y'know..." Newt noted, as he folded his arms.

"Obviously." Natal nodded.

"Alright then," Boomer said, already walking toward the hall to go outside. Cal followed, but less eagerly then Boomer did, and he glanced back wondering if the others would follow as well.

Sure enough, Team Alpha were walking after them, with Newt cracking his knuckles and neck, and Natal simply rubbing her wrists.

Cal wasn't worried about Newt, but he hoped that Newt wouldn't let

his aggression toward Cal get in the way...he didn't exactly want that drama to spill out.

Finally, the lot of them made it outside, and Boomer turned to await the rest of them. "Well, I'm ready," she said.

"I'm ready too," Cal said.

Nodding, Newt clenched his hands into fists, looking at Cal. "Bring it, y'know!"

"Don't hold back, now." Natal said calmly, as she folded her arms, keeping her gaze at Boomer.

Sitting down a distance from the group, Wiper nodded. "Whenever you're ready, start."

"Well, someone's got to make the first move," Boomer said, charging after Natal and throwing a punch. Before the punch could connect, Natal simply stepped to the side, letting Boomer stumble past her. Without a word, Natal quickly aimed to trip the duck by aiming a sweeping kick at Boomer's legs. Boomer did trip, but she recovered by somersaulting back onto her feet, and spun with a roundhouse kick toward Natal's head. Before the kick could hit her, Natal quickly responded with a kick of her own that struck Boomer's incoming leg, locking both of them in a power struggle.

Cal merely motioned for Newt to come with a hand. "Come on," he said.

"Yaaah!" Giving a brief battle cry, Newt ran towards Cal, intending to uppercut the monkey. Cal jolted his head back avoiding the uppercut, and aimed a punch toward Newt's stomach. Before Cal's punch could connect, however, Newt was quick to grab his fist, before suddenly flipping the monkey above his head, intending to slam him into the ground behind him. Cal turned it around and landed on his feet, reversing the strength to throw Newt over his own head and do the same trick.

Glancing out the window, Milo caught sight of this, and wondered why they were doing that, but it didn't seem hostile. He supposed

that Wiper would have it under control when the time came, so he looked away and returned to the matter at hand. "I hope he gets back soon," he murmured.

"Me too," Striker said, with Buddy adding on, "Chao."

At that point, someone suddenly appeared right next to them. "Got them."

"Proxy!" Jack exclaimed, as he turned to see Shadow, who glanced down at the green Chaos Emerald he held. "And you got the emeralds, too?"

"Yep." Shadow nodded, as he glanced at Jack. "With this, we can bring her back."

"Lets go to Sage so we can go get it done as quickly as possible," Milo said.

"I'm coming with you," From around the corner, Brick came with a serious look on his face.

"...I had a feeling you would." Shadow said with a smile, placing a hand on Brick's shoulder. "I'll get Sage. You guys go and wait outside."

"Right," Brick said. "C'mon guys," and the kids immediately followed him...all except Rudy, who noticed the others fighting outside. Looking, he noticed that both Boomer and Cal were pretty good at fighting...

"...maybe I'll stay here," Rudy said.

"...is that so?" Shadow hummed, before he nodded. "I see."

"You're heading off?" Blinking, Shadow glanced behind him, to see Lock standing with his back against the wall. "I might as well tag along."

"...right." Shadow nodded, before he began walking down the hall. "I'll be back with Sage, soon."

"...of course." Lock muttered, before he glanced at Rudy. "...you'll be alright, kid?"

"Yeah," Rudy answered, without turning away from the window. "...just as long as Cal and Boomer don't fight too much..."

"...I don't think it'll last much longer." Lock hummed, as he glanced out the window briefly. "It's nothing but a sparring round." Then, he walked towards where Brick and the kids had gone. "See you later."

"See ya..." he said. "...and good luck."

Brick and the kids had gone outside to the opposite side of the HQ, so they weren't confronted with Team Alpha, Boomer and Cal.

"Are you positive this is gonna work, Milo?" Ani asked nervously.

"I'm pretty sure it'll work," Milo answered.

"It has to..." Brick murmured.

"You're not in doubt, are you?" At that point, Lock emerged from the door, glancing at the group.

"No, we're not!" Jack said, as he looked at the bounty hunter. "This is going to work!"

"...stick to it, then." Lock said with a mild chuckle.

Brick looked up to the sky while waiting, worrying. *Brownie...we're coming for you,* he thought to himself. *I promise that if this works...nothing's gonna happen to you again...* and he closed his eyes, while feeling a cool breeze sweep past his face.

Soon, both Proxy and Sage emerged from the door, with Sage carrying Metal Sonic on her shoulder. "We're all ready, I take it?"

"...mhm." Lock nodded, as he folded his arms. "Let's go."

"Wait!" Just then, Tails Doll fluttered outside as well, perching himself on Brick's head. *"I... I wanna come, too!"*

Brick smiled when he looked at Tails Doll on his head.

"Of course you can come, Tails Doll," Ani said with a cheery smile.

"...thanks!" Tails Doll said with a small laugh.

"Well, now that we're ready..." Shadow mused, as he held out the green Chaos Emerald. "...let's go. Chaos Control!" Then, the group warped away.

The group reappeared right into the torrential downpour upon the island itself, and while instantly getting soaked, Ani shook herself. "Aw man! This is my favorite sweatshirt..." she murmured unhappily.

Milo looked around, and right then he sensed it to his relief, smiling. "...her spirit is present in this place," he said.

"That's a relief..." Tails Doll muttered.

"...the question is..." Lock hummed, as he looked around him. "...where do we go, now?"

Milo paced around, "Well, we'll have to find her body...and Callous' body as well-"

"-LOOK!" Striker interrupted with a point in a random direction, and once everyone did look, their mouths held gaping open.

From behind a tree, a certain watery creature came out, looking at them quietly. He sensed all 7 emeralds on them...but why? Why did they come with all of the Chaos Emeralds?

"...is that...Chaos, the God of Destruction?" Ani asked, baffled.

"...I do believe it is." Sage uttered, as she turned to face the watery creature, also letting Chaos see Metal.

Once the creature got a look at Metal, it was truly amazed. Surely that Unity energy had done that to him...and if they had brought Metal here with them, surely...they sought out the body of their

friend? With a motioning nudge of his head, Chaos turned around and walked away.

"I...think he wants us to follow," Milo assumed, and immediately took off after Chaos.

"...well, let's not keep him waiting." Shadow nodded, as he followed Milo, before the group walked after him as well.

All of the group took off quick enough to keep up with Chaos, until he eventually stopped in a thick wooded area, shielded from the rain to their relief. Then Chaos came over to a pile of leaves that were placed to cover up something...once the group was all there to see, Chaos uncovered the giant leaves one by one, and once he revealed what was hidden underneath, the horror was too great for the children to look upon and they turned away hurtfully.

For hidden underneath were the bodies of Jillian and Callous.

In silence, Lock looked down at the two bodies. *...one of them is Callous... so the other must be Jill.* he thought, as he glanced at the kids, all of them looking away from the bodies.

After a moment of silence out of respect, Milo finally had the courage to look back at the bodies. "...Shadow, can you place each of the emeralds in a circle around the two of them?" Milo asked, and hearing that made everyone flinch in shock.

"...what did you say, Milo?" Brick asked.

"...of course." Shadow nodded, as he moved towards Jill and Callous.

"Wait, wait, wait..." Tails Doll uttered, as he fluttered on top of Shadow's head. *"...this is Proxy, Milo."*

"...no..." Sage uttered, as she looked at Shadow. "...no, that's definitely Shadow."

"...b-but how?" Jack uttered.

Milo sighed in disdain at the reaction of his friends. "...it's a long

story; one that I'll explain in a moment when he's done putting the emeralds in place..."

"...hopefully, it won't be too confusing..." Lock muttered, as he glanced towards Shadow, who placed the emeralds around their bodies.

Milo sat down with criss-crossed legs, looking at the set up. "Until Metal wakes up, we'll have to wait to start it," he said. "So I'll use that time to tell you guys what you want to know." Then he gestured to the ground with a hand. "Please, have a seat everyone..."

With that, everyone sat down, looking at Milo.

"...even if Shadow died, he still wanted to help us," Milo began. "He saw that things were starting to grow out of control, and this was when Metal Sonic was sending the Shadow Androids to attack us...so Shadow's spirit embodied one of the androids, and tried to possess it. Something went wrong, and Shadow couldn't completely take control of it, but he managed to break it free from Metal's control. While trying to escape, I guess he broke off his head, and he came to us to get it repaired."

Striker's eyes widened in realization. "...you knew all along it was Shadow...that's why you were so calm to him when he came."

Milo nodded. "Yeah..."

"...but if that's the case..." Jack uttered, as he glanced at Shadow. "...then what happened with Proxy? Is he..."

"Proxy is okay, but since Proxy and Shadow are just two different people, his mind is kind of asleep with Shadow in control..." Milo said. "...he was a little afraid that I had to help Shadow completely possess him, but I made sure he knew that he was still our friend, and that he wasn't being used by Shadow. I wanted to help Shadow gain full control in case things...took a turn for the worst." and he looked at the bodies to confirm that.

"...really..." Lock hummed, as he folded his arms.

"But..." Sage mused, as she placed Metal on the ground. "...we're

going to make everything all better."

"...once Metal wakes up, and he's ready to do it..." Milo added, with a deep breath.

"I'll see if he's ready." Sage said, as she placed her hands against Metal's head.

"...hm?" Blinking, Lock glanced out towards the storm clouds. *...did I hear something, just now?*

Ani's ears suddenly perked up, and she felt uneasy. "I just heard something..."

"...what was it?" Jack uttered, as he glanced at Ani.

"...it sounded..." Lock hummed, as he narrowed his eyes. "...like a roar."

"Don't tell me it's..." Brick knew that couldn't be good. But how would he have been able to get here? Through this hideous storm?

Glancing out towards the storm, Lock sighed. "...you guys wait here. I'll hold him off." he said, before he began walking away from the group, keeping his gaze pointed forward. As he walked, now, the group could all hear a demonic roar ring through the storm.

The kids cowered in fear, and Brick looked sternly in the direction he heard the roar. "...he shouldn't be out there alone," he said, getting up.

"Brick, no!" Striker urged desperately. "He might be too strong!"

"...I'll help him out." Sage said, as she stood up from Metal, before glancing at Brick. "Metal's going to wake up, soon. I'm sure me and Lock will suffice as a wall until he can go through with it." Then, she walked out after Lock.

"Sage..." Jack uttered, as he glanced worriedly at Brick, wondering what he would do.

Brick closed his eyes, and realized more important priorities here,

while looking at Jill. "...I guess I'll stay here, just in case I have to protect you guys in the last minute," He said, nodding.

As a louder roar tore through the sky, Sage and Lock simply watched the sky, waiting for something to pop out. "...don't get yourself hurt, now." Sage quipped.

"I'm a professional; you don't need to worry about me." Lock scoffed, pulling out a pair of pistols from his coat.

Soon, they could see that the clouds in one area were expanding, as if something was building up pressure within it. Then, as one more roar rung out, a black figure tore through the cloud, rocketing towards Sage and Lock. *"Get out of my way!"* Johnny yelled at the top of his lungs. *"I'm gonna bring back Callous!"*

"That doesn't sound good," remarked Brick.

Milo quickly closed his eyes and began to concentrate. "I'm going to open the gates between the spirit world and our world...this will allow us to pull Jill and Callous out and do the ceremony..."

"...ah! Big Bro's waking up!" Tails Doll exclaimed, as slowly, Metal actually sat up, holding his head.

"...ungh..." he uttered. "...we're here...?"

"...Metal?" Blinking, Jack placed a hand on Metal's forehead. "...oh, shoot! He's still got a fever!"

"I'll be fine..." Metal uttered, as he looked at Jill and Callous' bodies. "...let's just do it."

At that point, explosions began erupting outside, as Sage, Lock and Johnny were locked in a brutal battle.

"Oh geez, they're crazy!" Ani commented, hearing the explosions.

By then, Milo opened his eyes. "The gate has been opened...Metal, wait until my mark..."

The doors reappeared again in that chapel, and when they popped open, they opened to a blinding light, bringing in a blistering wind.

Jill's eyes widened. "...the gate really is open..."

"Like, that's really bright!" Bliss said, as she shielded her eyes from the light.

"...guess it's time..." Sprinter hummed, before he glanced at the two ewes. "Are you ready?"

Jill looked to Callous nervously. Knowing the conflict the two had, this decision could not be made so quickly for Callous. When Callous noticed Jill looking at her, she didn't look at her with a sour look.

In fact, Jill could swear that the look softened.

Jill remembered the dream she had. Callous was a part of her...and she needed to welcome her back. So she held out a hand to Callous, which kind of surprised Callous for a minute. "...the life Johnny promises you...isn't the kind of life you'd want, Callous," she said. "...if freedom and happiness is what you want, then I can share what I have with you...because to be honest...we can't live without each other. Not really..."

Callous closed her eyes, silently pondering what she would do.

"...you guys better decide on something; the fight's getting brutal!" Bliss called, as she looked towards the swirl; as it turned out, as good a fight as Sage and Lock put up, Johnny was simply too strong for them, keeping them from hurting him one bit, while at the same time wiping the floor with the two.

Finally...Callous took Jill's hand, and stood up to meet her. "You're too merciful for your own good, you know that?"

"I know," Jill said. Then she smiled, jokingly. "Maybe you could fix that."

Callous smirked. "Maybe I could." Then the two of them looked to the light at the doors. "...just go easy on Johnny...okay?" Callous

said.

"...I'll try," Jill said with a nod.

Then the two of them took a quick run for the light.

Metal...Brick...guys, Jill thought, as they disappeared out into the light. *...we're coming...*

"...there they go." Sprinter hummed, just as those doors shut tight and vanished away.

"...like, I hope they'll be safe." Bliss sighed, as she glanced back at the swirl.

"I'm sure they will be," Desperado said, looking at the swirl as well.

Chapter 81

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-ONE

Milo's eyes shot open, and quickly looked behind him to witness a flash of light. Then two figures of light whooshed past him, and circled around each other. Milo stared at this scene wide-eyed. "...it's them!" he uttered. "The re-birthing process!"

Indeed, for the more the two figures of light circled around each other, the closer they became, until the lights literally intertwined with each other, becoming one recognizable glowing figure that suspended in the air above them, and slowly descended down to them.

"Metal...you have to take that soul and put it in Jill," Milo said.

"...alright..." Metal nodded, as he allowed Unity to coat his arms, before slowly reaching his arms out to the spirit.

Suddenly, Johnny sensed something off. *"...Callous!"* he roared, just as he took a full salvo from Lock's guns; however, with new resolve, he suddenly rocketed past Sage and Lock, headed towards where the others were.

"Shoot, he's fast!" Sage uttered. "GUYS! HE'S COMING!"

Brick jumped to his feet and stood fast, ready to block Johnny when he came.

"If you use the Chaos Emerald's power combined with Unity, and use that on her body as you place the soul in, it should do it," Milo said, trying to remain calm.

Metal nodded, as he gently began lowering the spirit down into the body, trying to resonate the Unity with the Chaos Emeralds. *...Jill... please, come back...* he thought.

"I'M NOT GONNA LET YOU DO AS YOU PLEASE!" Johnny roared,

as he pulled his fist backwards, preparing to punch Brick in the face once he got there. *"I'M GOING TO BRING BACK CALLOUS!"*

All of a sudden, however, a massive sonic wave suddenly crashed right onto the dark being, actually pushing him backwards. "...forget it!" Jack called, as he stood next to Brick, holding his harmonica ready. "You're not bringing her back!"

...now! In that instant, Metal placed the spirit within the body, as the Chaos Emeralds were engulfed in a brilliant glow.

Jill's body took on just as brilliant a glow as the emeralds did, glowing with dark green Unity, while they rose and began revolving in the air around her. Callous' body made a golden glow, and slowly deteriorated away in golden dust. Then the golden dust channeled into Jill, turning her dark green glow into a golden glow, as the wound on her chest shrank away.

"...it's working..." Metal uttered.

" Hn *? What's going on in there?"* Johnny growled, as he rushed towards the group. *"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"*

"Look out!" Quickly, Jack began playing his harmonica again, creating a shock-wave strong enough to keep Johnny from advancing. *...hurry up... I'm running out of breath...* he thought, without letting up for a single second.

Soon the wound on Jill was gone, but the emeralds continued to revolve; more and more quickly as the seconds passed, while the others watched in uneasy anticipation...

...then the emeralds suddenly stopped. They lowered to the ground, and Jill herself was lowered down to the ground delicately, as her glow and the emeralds' glow died down.

"...did it work...?" Metal uttered, as he knelt down by Jill, placing a hand on her cheek.

"...please, let her wake up..." Tails Doll uttered, as he glanced towards Jack and Johnny, the latter slowly, but surely, pushing

through the sound-waves Jack was creating, and Brick put an aura of red Chaos Energy around himself, just in case Johnny broke through Jack's defense.

A warmth gained presence to Metal's touch, and something else became noticeable too.

Breathing.

"...damn... it..." Johnny grunted, as his pupilless eyes glared at his nephew, dark energy swirling around his body. *"...why... do... you... stop... me?"*

"Because Brownie deserves to live, Callous doesn't," Brick answered bluntly.

Hearing Brick quip that, Johnny snapped. Letting out a monstrous roar, all the dark energy swirling around him accumulated in his mouth, before shooting out as a massive beam, threatening to engulf everyone.

However, the beam was suddenly deflected by a psychic barrier, with someone within it. "No can do, Johnny!" Sage called, as she had managed to get Lock in-between Johnny and the others, the weasel-wolf aiming his rifle at the dark lion.

"Begone." Lock said coldly, firing a single, high-powered round from the rifle, pretty much tearing Johnny's body in two right there and then, sending the lion flying a distance away.

Jill's hand twitched, and slowly rose to touch Metal's hand that was on her cheek. Then her eyes opened, and while looking upon Metal, she smiled. "Metal..." she mumbled.

"...Jill..." Metal uttered, as he couldn't help but close his eyes, trying to hide the fact that he was crying. "...forgive me..."

Jill tilted her head, while wiping a tear with her finger. "Forgive you for what?" she murmured.

"...if it hadn't been for me..." Metal uttered, as he looked away from

Jill. "...if I had only told you of my predicament... you wouldn't have needed to go to such extremes..."

"That gonna keep him off?" Brick asked Lock, losing the red aura around himself.

"Doubt it." Lock muttered, as he glanced at Brick. "Remember, he survived Sage blowing his body to pieces. He'll be back soon, so get ready, everyone."

"...now, it's really time to finish him off." Sage muttered, as she glanced towards Johnny, who was slowly piecing himself together.

Brick growled while he watched Johnny come back together, and just about everyone else watched this too, which was probably why no one noticed yet that Jill was awake.

Jill sat up, putting her hand under Metal's chin to make him look at her. "Everything's okay Metal..." she said, trying to comfort him; the humor in it that she didn't consider the dangers of Johnny building back up. "I'm here..."

"...y-yes..." Metal uttered with a nod, forcing a smile. "...you are."

At that point, Johnny had completely reformed, before he let out a monstrous roar. *"BASTARDS!"* he roared, as Corruption swirled around his entire body, before he shot right at the group, leaving a massive trail of dark fire behind him.

However, before he could reach the group, someone suddenly appeared in front of the lion, before kicking him in the face with a leg coated in Corruption as well, actually halting Johnny. "...I don't think so." Shadow uttered, before he punched Johnny in the face, causing the lion to stagger back.

"Go Shadow!" Ani called out.

Snarling, Johnny glared at Shadow. *"...you're gonna stand in my way, too?"* he yelled, Corruption swirling around him. *"What can you do? You've only got a little Corruption in you! I'm the strongest, and I'll bring Callous back to life!"*

"...sorry to say, but that won't happen." Shadow scoffed, as he motioned for Johnny to come at him.

"...you..." Snarling, the Corruption began forming into a massive ball hovering above Johnny, who was lifting one hand upwards, making it look like he was holding the ball of Corruption in the air. *"...DIE!"* he roared, before hurling the massive sphere at Shadow. *"DIE BY THE DARKNESS!"*

In the blink of an eye, just as that sphere would've hit Shadow, it was deflected away and it plowed into the trees at the side, destroying that part of the woods.

"Johnny, this needs to stop."

Everyone looked with gaping mouths and widened eyes, seeing Jill standing in front of Shadow and facing Johnny without fear; strangely enough, even with a soft, calm look. She had appeared so quickly...

Brick was shaken. "...B...Brownie..."

Seeing Jill standing before him, Johnny's eyes widened. *"...Jill?"* he uttered. *"...but... you were dead! If you're alive, then... WHERE'S CALLOUS?"*

"She's alive too Johnny," Jill said, and then set gestured to herself. "Alive and well within me...where she belongs."

"...what did you say?" Johnny growled, as he began approaching Jill. *"Callous is within you... is that right?"*

"Yes," Jill shot a sharp look at Johnny. "And she doesn't like what's happened to you."

Hearing that, Johnny stopped. *"...come again?"*

"She doesn't like what you've become..." Jill answered. "...she didn't want you to become just another Deity Novagod."

"...become... Deity Novagod...?" Johnny uttered, as he looked down at his own arms. *"...no... no, no, I'm still me! Like hell that I'd ever*

become anything like that bat!" he snapped, shooting Jill a fierce glare. *"I gained power because I needed to bring her back! What the hell is so wrong with that?"*

She closed her eyes, "...I guess nothing was wrong with you wanting to bring Callous back," Jill said, which baffled the others. "...she really did love you...she loved you enough that she wanted to properly train you to use Corruption, so it didn't take over you and turn you into nothing more than a monster...but that's what happened when she died..."

"...monster...?" Johnny uttered, clenching his hands into fists. *"...no, I'm not a monster! Had I been a monster, the Corruption would've controlled my body for me... but I've conquered it! I can master it, even like this!"*

"Johnny..." At that point, Metal also approached Johnny, standing by Jill. "...that's enough. Callous isn't coming back."

"...you shut up, Metal!" Johnny snapped, glaring at Metal. *"This is all your fault, anyway! If it hadn't been for you getting all friendly with Jill, Callous would still be alive! Why couldn't you just leave well enough alone?"*

Jill closed her eyes, and sighed. "...I really didn't want to cause that kind of pain to anyone," she said.

Jill's being nice...toward Johnny? Milo thought in disbelief.

"...I can still bring her back..." Johnny uttered, as he glanced back at Jill, Corruption amassing around him. *"...I just have to pull her out of you, don't I? Once I do that..."*

"I'm sorry Johnny, but I can't let you do that," Jill said, however no action seemed to indicate it, as she just stood right there.

"...don't underestimate me, just because you control Purity!" Johnny snapped, as he cracked his neck. *"With all the spirits me and Callous collected... and all the energy within Deity Novagod... I can bring her back..."* Then, he rushed right at Jill. *"AND NO ONE IS*

GOING TO STOP ME!"

"You're wrong Johnny," Jill said. "...I don't control Purity anymore..." She simply hopped away from Johnny to evade him, and opened up her hands. Like she said, it was not a pale green energy...

...but a certain dark, green energy that became visible above her palms.

Seeing that, both Johnny and Metal glanced at Jill in surprise. "...is that..." Metal uttered. "...Unity?"

"...big deal!" Johnny growled, as Corruption began building up around his arms. *"I can still rip Callous out of you!"* he said, before rushing at Jill again.

Jill didn't dodge again. In fact, she waited until the very last minute that Johnny would hit her, aiming both palms at the monster to unleash a beam of Unity right into his face.

Without having anticipated that move, Johnny took the blast head-on, and while it didn't tear his face off, one could see that it took its toll on the lion. *"...AAAAGH!"* he roared, clutching his face in pain. *"IT BURNS!"*

"...tsch..." Metal scoffed, as he stepped away.

"...like that'll stop me!" Johnny yelled, as he suddenly began firing balls of flaming Corruption from his mouth, aiming them at Jill with rapid succession.

Jill was blown back by the Corruption, and of course it hurt her...

"Brownie!" Brick uttered in desperation.

...but one thing they noticed was that Jill was not knocked off her feet. Even with a black fire burning on her jacket from the Corruption, Jill quickly put it out with her hands, and whatever burn markings she had that was inflicted with Corruption, withered away within seconds.

"...whoa," Striker uttered, along with Buddy croaking from atop his

head. "...chao."

"...what?" Johnny uttered, as he gritted his teeth, Corruption practically exploding around him. *"Why... even with all this power... WHY AREN'T YOU GETTING HURT, DAMMIT?"* Roaring, Johnny rocketed towards Jill, intending to punch her right through the gut.

Jill only caught the fist and stopped Johnny in his tracks right there. Whatever Corruption that was oozing out of his fist hurt Jill, but did not make any permanent mark on her as she continued to hold it.

"...she's not fighting back?" Milo murmured in bewilderment.

"...I could say something entirely cheesy and cliche, or I could just tell you that I have better self-control on my ability," Jill answered.

"...you're kidding me..." Johnny growled, as he applied even more Corruption to his body. *"...you can't be stronger than me! If that's the case, then..."*

"...she's... stronger than Novagod...?" Metal finished, as he watched the battle in surprise.

Jill winced at the Corruption, but still it did nothing to leave marks on her hand. "Well, if you happened to beat Deity and suck out his energy dry, then I guess it would led to that assumption, wouldn't it?" she asked, looking at Johnny coldly.

Snarling, Johnny kept applying pressure to his fist. *"...shut up... I'M GOING TO BRING CALLOUS BACK!"* Then, out of nowhere, he suddenly aimed a powerful punch at Jill's gut with his free hand.

Jill was thrown backwards with a painful grunt, but again, she didn't fall off her feet. One mad look at Johnny suddenly got him whip-lashed across the face...

...with a whip?

"What in the world?" Brick uttered, seeing as Jill possessed a whip.

Staggering back, Johnny glared at Jill. "...you bitch..." he spat.

"...you're copying her now, too?"

Jill's glare sharpened, while she opened her mouth and spoke. *"$%#*%()$*#(#$)$*#(%)$*(#)"* and it turned out to be the same language Callous tried to use on Shadow before; the language used to persuade those under the influence of Corruption.

Roughly, she said, " *Listen, I wouldn't copy her, but you need to get yourself under control."*

"...under control...?" Johnny uttered, as he growled. *"...what the hell is that supposed to mean?"*

Jill shrugged, *"You seemed hysterical. Now..."* she returned that glare back at Johnny. *"...you're not ready to face me yet...so I'm willing to spare you for now."*

"Why is Jill talking funny?" Ani asked.

"...she's speaking a different language." Shadow said, as he folded his arms. "One that only those versed in Corruption can comprehend... I suppose the same goes if you're skilled in Unity."

"...you wanna spare me?" Johnny uttered, as he snarled. *"Don't you dare pity me! If you have the power to kill me, then why not go for it?"*

"Because I want to give you a fair fight, before I take back my mother's castle, and my mother," Jill growled back. " *Believe me, I would've wanted to end it right now...but Callous wouldn't want that."*

"...kkh..." Snarling, Johnny simply glared at Jill, before pointing his arm at her. *"...you'd better be ready, because I'm going to get Callous out of your body, one way or another. Count on it!"*

"Just go," Jill said coldly.

"...kkh... fine." Johnny growled, before he took flight, rocketing right through the clouds, leaving the island completely.

"...you're sure about this?" Metal inquired, as he glanced at Jill.

"Yes," she said, without looking back. "...it's only fair..." finally, she turned around and looked at everyone. It was silent staring until Jill took a deep breath, "Whew..." and fell on her knees.

"Brownie!" Brick blurted, running to her and kneeling in front of her, taking her by the shoulders.

"I'm alright," Jill assured. "...I'm still a little low on steam..."

Brick smiled, and kissed her despite it being in front of everyone. "You're alive," he uttered, hugging her closely as tears of joy rolled down his face.

And Jill held him just as close as he did her. "Brick..."

Watching this, Lock glanced at the kids. "...are you guys just going to stand there?" he hummed.

"Course not!" Striker blurted, as he ran for Jill as well, grabbing her and Brick in a hug. Ani and Milo joined, turning it into a big group hug around Jill. Jack joined the hug as well.

"...well, she's back..." Sage said with a smile, wiping her forehead. "That's a relief."

"I'm sure that everyone is going to be happy to have her back..." Lock mused, before he glanced towards Metal, who simply watched the group hug from a distance.

Brick rose his head from the hug to see Metal. "...thank you," he said to the hedgehog, just as all the other kids broke away.

"...don't mention it." Metal said with a nod, before walking away from the group, towards Sage, Lock and Tails Doll.

"...what will you do now?" Shadow inquired, as he glanced towards Metal.

"I have to prepare." Metal said. "With Novagod gone, my target has changed."

Jill rose to her feet, and suddenly...turned to walk away somewhere.

"...Brownie?" Brick uttered, watching her walk away.

It stopped her for an instant, only for her to say, "There's something I need to do..." and with that, she actually took off running. Chaos, who hadn't said a thing or done anything for the past time everything happened, ran off following her.

"Hey, wait!" Ani cried, running after them as well.

"...where is she going?" Lock uttered, as he ran after them as well.

Soon everyone else ended up following Jill, but she was far up ahead of them along with Chaos. They saw Jill and Chaos running for the large pieces of land floating in the middle of the storm. hopping across each piece of land like mere hopscotch.

Milo finally caught on to where she was going. "...she's heading toward the eye of the storm!"

"...why?" Metal uttered. "What is she going to do there?"

"...don't tell me..." Shadow mused. *...the Master Emerald?* he thought.

Jill and Chaos stopped in front of the large piece of land that was before the stormy wall, and it allowed the others to finally catch up with them. Jill only glanced behind her seeing them, and then turned back to the storm before her. She summoned Unity energy to her touch, and sliced her hands into the storm. When she split her hands, it literally split the stormy wall in half, blowing it away to kingdom come.

Striker's and Buddy's eyes widened. "...whoa..."

Jill looked up. Once that part of the storm had been cleared, she, and everyone else could see what had been behind it. It was none other than that calm, serene area where the light came down from above, putting a spotlight on that particular pyramid...the place that Miser had discovered yesterday.

And atop that pyramid was the Master Emerald.

"...there it is." Shadow hummed.

"...it's really the Master Emerald..." Sage noted.

"...was that causing the storm?" Brick questioned, but Jill didn't answer as she senselessly took off running again, for the pyramid. Chaos of course, followed.

The others came, but remained at bay away from the pyramid, because of such negative energies coming out of it. Somehow, Jill and Chaos managed to press forward, even all the way up the stairs of the pyramid and in front of the Master Emerald.

What are you doing, Brownie? Brick wondered in thought.

Chaos brought out the seven emeralds from nowhere, and all of them immediately rose into the air, and circled around the Master Emerald as they began to shine and glow brightly. The Master Emerald was reacting somehow, becoming less violent, but there was still a disturbance within it. Jill saw this, and reached out to touch the Master Emerald.

Seeing this, Metal was absolutely awed. "...Jill?"

Jill hesitated once she heard Metal, and she turned back to shoot a small smile at him, before her hand touched the Master Emerald. Green sparks of electricity crawled up her arm, and she winced in pain, but it didn't blow her off like it had done to Miser. Her touch also brought out another reaction from the Master Emerald as it began glowing; brighter and brighter.

"Master Emerald!" Jill shouted. "I give you back your guardian!"

Thus there was a bright flash from it, and it was so bright that it would've blinded everyone.

While everyone shielded their eyes from the bright light, Metal still tried looking past the light. *...what is...* he thought.

Outside the island in the clear skies, two air vehicles were on the move aimed straight for the large storm; one which was an orange bi-plane, and the other which was a helicopter. In the helicopter was

Charmy, with Cream in the passenger seat, and piloting the plane was Tails.

"To think they would take off without us," Charmy murmured under his breath.

"Look!" Cream pointed. There was something in the storm they noticed when they got close enough. There seemed to be a bright green glow coming from inside the storm.

"...is that..." Tails uttered, as he squinted. "...just what is happening over there?"

The glow pieced through the storm in rays of green light, and slowly but surely broke apart the storm, until the rays of light slowly began to fade. At that point, the dark clouds that swirled around were gradually blown off, revealing something underneath bit by bit.

...first it was the mountain top, and then the rest of the island took its time coming out of hiding.

Cream covered her mouth in shock. "The storm...it's..."

"...its disappearing," Charmy uttered.

"...how on..." Tails uttered. "...what did they accomplish in such a short time?"

Charmy spied a certain area that the storm cleared away. It was that pyramid...and the Master Emerald, and- "Over there!" he shouted, pulling the helicopter toward that direction.

Once everyone opened they're eyes, they realized many things. The Master Emerald was not blinding them anymore, and the 7 Chaos Emeralds were calmly dancing around the large gem, but most of all. "...what happened to the storm?" Ani suddenly asked. They didn't see dark, ominous clouds anymore, but instead a clear blue sky over a sea of pure white clouds.

Somehow...the island was normal...

Jill was on the ground, and she weakly tried getting back up to her

feet.

At that point, Metal actually lifted Jill on her feet. "...you're alright?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jill answered. Then she looked up at the now peaceful Master Emerald.

"...Brownie," Brick uttered. "What did you do?"

Jill didn't turn back to him; she only continued to stare at the Master Emerald. "I returned it's guardian to it," she answered.

"...you mean Knuckles?" Shadow inquired.

"Mhm," Jill nodded. She, along with everyone else, suddenly saw something...or *someone* standing there, with their hand on the Master Emerald. Though the figure was transparent, it was still easily seen, and they turned around with a thankful smile at Jill.

"Thank you," the transparent figure said, who nothing more than the red echidna whom had been mentioned of earlier.

"...well, I'll be..." Sage hummed, as she folded her arms.

"...good to be back?" Shadow presumed, as he folded his arms.

"You bet," Knuckles answered back. Once his eye caught something in the skies, he turned, and so did everyone else. The helicopter and the airplane came for them, and proceeded to make their landing on the cliff-side near the pyramid.

"...its the Captain and the Professor!" exclaimed Striker.

"They're here?" Jack uttered in surprise, as he looked up at the helicopter and plane.

"...and I do believe that Cream is riding with the Captain." Sage shot in.

Knuckles smiled again, as he watched the helicopter slow to a stop and hover above the ground till it placed on the ground, and killed

the engine. The plane, meanwhile, had to come in and brake against the ground until it came to a full stop, and by then Charmy and Cream already climbed out of the helicopter and hurried toward the group.

That is, until they noticed Jill...then they stopped abruptly.

Cream's eyes widened. "Jill...you're alive..."

As they stopped, Tails got out of the plane, just noticing Jill as well. "...she's..." he uttered.

"...quite a shock, isn't it?" Metal muttered, as he glanced away from the group.

Charmy walked up to Jill, and smiled. "Thank goodness. It's a miracle...but how?"

"...I suppose you should regard your thanks to Milo and Metal Sonic for this one." Shadow said with a nod to Charmy. "Milo managed to bring Jill's spirit back to this realm, and Metal placed it where it belongs; Jill's body."

"Well I'll be," Charmy said. Then he looked all around them at the clear sky and the bright sun that shined upon them. "But what I can't figure out is how you..." and the old bee trailed off when his sights directed toward the Master Emerald.

Then he couldn't speak at all. Neither could Cream for that matter, when she saw what he saw.

Knuckles looked back at them quietly. "Tails, Charmy, Cream...you guys really grew to an old age," he said.

"...Knuckles..." Seeing the red echidna by the emerald, Tails was, more or less, dumbstruck, as he slowly approached the pyramid. "...it's... really you?"

"Yeah, it's me," Knuckles said, putting his hand on the Master Emerald again, making it glow. "...and I'm not alone."

After the Master Emerald glowed, other transparent figures seemed

to appear around the emerald; all of whom were recognized. Rouge, Amy, Tikal, Vector, Mighty, Espio were there. Even Desperado, Bliss and Sprinter appeared as well, standing among the group that appeared.

And atop the Master Emerald, one more figure appeared, sitting on top of it.

"...oh my..." Cream croaked.

That last figure was the infamous blue hedgehog, and he looked at the three elders silently; mostly Tails.

"...S-Sonic...?" Tails uttered, as he looked up at the blue hedgehog with a stunned look.

Sonic made a small wave, "Hey Tails." And he didn't look as enthusiastic as he usually did...

Metal, who had just glanced up at Sonic, immediately noticed that. "...something wrong, Sonic?" he inquired.

"I didn't know how the three of them would feel, seeing me," Sonic answered. "Or any of us for that matter..."

"Vector, Espio, Mighty..." Charmy gulped. "...is that really you guys?"

"...yep." Mighty said with a nod, rubbing the back of his head. "...it's really been too long, hasn't it?"

"You guys've really grown, I gotta say!" Vector chimed in, trying to sound optimistic.

Espio, on the other hand, merely regarded a nod to Charmy.

"Amy..." Cream muttered.

Amy's brows arched sympathetically. "It's good to see you Cream. You look so grown-up too."

"...but how?" Charmy finally had the guts to ask. "How are you guys here?"

Everyone simply pointed to one person, and Tails, Charmy and Cream looked to see that they were pointing at Jill.

"...Jill?" Tails uttered in surprise, as he looked at the ewe. "...but... how?"

Jill closed her eyes. "...I kind of have a confession to make," she said, scratching her head. "I've been able to talk to them over the past 2 weeks that this whole thing has happened...in the end, they wanted me to come to Angel Island, and it wasn't until a few minutes ago I realized why..." then she looked up at them.

"No way..." Striker said. "It's really them, the Professor's friends...and Jill could talk to them?"

Closing his eyes, Metal glanced away from the group.

"I'm not sure if I should have told any of you or not..." Sage hummed, as she looked up at Sonic.

"Wait, you knew it, too?" Tails Doll said in surprise, as he glanced at the raven.

"Yep." Sage nodded. "I found out when I first dove into her mind."

"Same old Sage," Desperado murmured, crossing his arms.

"Now, I don't believe we've really met the three of you," Rouge said, looking at Desperado, Bliss and Sprinter.

Glancing at Rouge, Bliss rubbed the back of her neck. "...well, we're, like, no one of consequence, really. We just happened to, like, get mixed up in this. But in any case, I'm Bliss, and they're Sprinter and Desperado."

"Still, I'd never imagine that we'd get here..." Sprinter hummed, before he glanced at Sage, who only cast a glance at them. "...or that we'd see such a familiar face again."

"...I can only guess that the others will be much more surprised than me." Sage said with a slight chuckle.

Tikal smiled when she looked at Chaos. "At least the Master Emerald is at peace again, along with the rest of the island."

Sonic smirked. "And this means you guys can have that showdown with that Johnny guy...with our help."

Jill flinched. "What did you say?"

"You heard what I said," Sonic said. "If the time comes, holler for us. We spirits still know how to fight, and we want one last chance to sock it to 'em."

"...I have a question." Metal suddenly said, as he glanced up at Sonic. "The Chaos Emeralds... do they need to stay here?"

"Nope, we just needed them for the Master Emerald," Sonic replied. "They're all yours. Just don't turn Super or they'll split again...and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"...no." Metal said with a nod, before he began collecting the Chaos Emeralds. "...Jill." Once he got the last one, he looked towards the ewe. "When you feel ready to finish off Johnny... come to Metropolis. In the meantime, I'll leave you to spend time with your friends; I'm sure they've missed you."

"...okay," Jill said with a nod.

"...I'll see you when you're ready." Metal muttered, before glancing at Tails Doll. "Let's go."

"...okay, Big Bro ." Tails Doll nodded, as he fluttered towards Metal. *"...can I visit them later?"*

"I'll need you for something when we get to Metropolis." Metal said, before giving the group a nod. "See you later." Then, both he and Tails Doll warped away.

"To think, that Metal was willing to bring you back to life," Rouge murmured, looking at Jill.

"...he really has changed from before..." Shadow hummed, as he folded his arms.

"Anyone wanna make a bet that if he could bring Sonic back to life, he would?" Rouge chuckled.

"Probably just to kill me himself," Sonic said with a shrug.

Jill looked away from everyone toward the blue sky. "I'm wondering if merging back with Callous will have any side effects I don't know about..."

"...well..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed the back of his neck. "...perhaps we should... return back home?"

"...yeah, we should," Brick said.

"Well to save you time, we can drop you guys off," Sonic said. Just when Jill was about to respond, the Master Emerald began glowing brightly, and like it had done before with Jill, it gave a blinding flash, causing everyone to cover their eyes.

...finally, when the light died, and everyone opened their eyes, they quickly realized they weren't by the Master Emerald anymore, or even Angel Island at all for that matter.

They were all back on the helipad on top of the Chaotix HQ. Even the helicopter and the airplane were parked on there, and everyone looked around in astonishment.

"...We're back at the HQ," Cream murmured.

"...that's convenient." Lock hummed, as he folded his arms.

"...mhm." Shadow nodded, as he glanced around him.

"C'mon, let's go let everyone know we're back," Ani said, immediately running for the door inside.

"Chao!" Buddy called, flying off after her, which prompted Striker to follow, and Milo too.

"Come on, let's go!" Jack called, as he followed the kids as well.

Charmy and Cream looked at each other. What just happened had

them both pretty shaken up...Angel Island had been restored to normal, after all these years of that storm tearing it down bit by bit...and seeing their long lost friends...

Both of them just entered inside in silence.

Jill looked at them with some concern. She hoped it wasn't too hard on them after all they went through. Then she felt a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to meet Brick. "They'll be alright," he said, almost having read her mind by her expression. "They just need some time to adjust."

"...I suppose..." Sage hummed, as she, Shadow, Lock and Tails walked towards the inside. "You two close the door after you, alright?" she said before vanishing down the stairs.

Both of them nodded to Sage and watched her disappear. Then the two of them entangled in another hug, while Brick stroked her hair. "I thought I really lost you for a minute, Brownie," he murmured.

"Everything's okay Brick," Jill mumbled beside him. "I'm here..."

"Yeah, you are," Brick said, smiling.

...Deja vu, Jill thought.

Meanwhile, down on the field outside, Boomer was trying to catch her breath since the fight was quite a workout, and Cal only stood. After all, he had a more advanced respiratory system than she did.

Both Newt and Natal were catching their breath as well, as they only looked at their opponents.

"...I'd say that's enough." Wiper finally shot in, as he stood up, giving Boomer and Cal a nod. "Consider yourselves members of GUN from now on."

"Yes!" Boomer said, throwing a fist. Cal only smiled with relief, and satisfaction.

"Guys! Guys!" Rudy ran outside after them. "You guys fought really well! But there's something I gotta tell you guys!"

"What is it Rudy?" Boomer asked.

"Brick and the guys are back, and Jill's with them!" he exclaimed happily.

"...Jill's with them?" Natal uttered in surprise.

"You're serious?" Newt said in a startled tone.

"...are they inside the HQ, Rudy?" Wiper inquired.

"Yeah, c'mon!" Rudy urged, already hopping away back inside.

Boomer and Cal looked at each other with their own shocked looks, and immediately ran inside, presumably with Team Alpha following them.

Brick and Jill came back inside, and walked into a room to find a good deal of the GUN agents.

"Jill!" Hunter uttered in disbelief. "You're alive!"

"Kekekeke?" Ripper cackled the moment he saw Jill. "It's you! It's really you! Kekekeke!"

"...Jill..." Miser uttered in absolute surprise.

"...this is a surprise..." Queen mused, as she looked at Jill.

King, however, was silent, as he could only gape as he looked at the ewe.

Jill didn't know what to say, while studying all their reactions to seeing her. Hunter came up and put a hand on her shoulder. "...don't scare us like that," he managed to say.

"...seriously!" King eventually managed to say, as he clenched his hands into fists. "You really made us all worry!"

"I'm...sorry..." Jill uttered, because that made her feel pretty guilty as she looked to the ground. She remembered the way they reacted when they learned of her death...

"...w-wait, I didn't mean it like that!" King suddenly said, as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Argh, me and my big mouth..."

Hunter gave her a pat. "Don't take it personally, Jill," he said. "That's just the way King is."

Jill nodded, and tried to smile.

"...still, it's good to see you back, Jill." Queen said with a nod to the ewe.

"...um..." Miser began, but she quickly stopped herself before she could say whatever it was she had on her mind.

"What is it Miser?" Hunter asked, noticing this.

"...it's nothing." Miser replied.

Just then, Rudy came around the corner, and he immediately grabbed Jill in a hug. "It's really true!" he laughed. "You're okay!"

"Hi Rudy," Jill said, hugging him back as she watched Cal, Boomer, and Team Alpha come into the room then. Boomer and Cal stopped, looking at Jill with widened eyes.

"...you're really alive..." Wiper uttered, as he could only look at Jill.

"...this is weird, y'know..." Newt uttered.

"...but it's still a miracle." Natal continued.

Cal eased by clearing his throat, and he adjusted his glasses. "If you're alive, then whatever happened to Callous?" he wondered.

Jill let Rudy go, and looked at all of them before she closed her eyes, and gestured to herself. "...she gave herself up to me to bring be back to life...and she's still with me, but she won't be able to do any more harm ever again..."

"...why in the world would Callous agree to that?" Hunter asked, baffled.

"...because she didn't like what Johnny turned into," Jill said, opening her eyes again.

"...you mean his dark form?" King presumed. "Just how did he get that kind of form, to begin with?"

"His grief over Callous caused the Corruption to react so strongly that it consumed him," Jill answered. "...Callous and I know that once the Corruption does that, it'll start to eat away at someone, no matter how good they are at Corruption..."

"That explains why he acted like a beast..." Wiper muttered.

"...but after Sage blew him up, he actually regained his senses..." King hummed. "...what'll happen with him, if ya just leave him be?"

"It may happen again," Jill answered. "Maybe even worse than the last time..."

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"...then what guarantee do we have that he won't succumb to Corruption again, and attack us while we're all asleep?" Queen inquired, as she folded her arms.

"I don't plan to let that happen," Jill said. "If he's going after anyone, it'll be me...because he's still convinced he can yank Callous out of me and bring her back."

"Can he do that?" Hunter asked in amazement.

Jill closed her eyes while pondering it. "...I don't know," she answered. "It could be possible."

"Kekeke..." Ripper hummed, as he folded his arms whilst looking at Jill. "...are you going after him on your own, then?"

"No, I won't go alone," Jill said. "I'm guessing that Metal's coming with me since he's got the same idea of taking down Johnny, but I would think that you guys would want to be part of the final battle too."

"As much as I'd like to wipe out that lion..." King muttered, as he folded his arms. "...the problem is, with all that Corruption he's got, none of us got a proper chance of actually hurting the bastard."

"So it seems that the only ones who can defeat Johnny are you and Metal, Jill." Wiper muttered, as he rubbed his right hand.

Jill closed her eyes again. She understood their problem with it, and if she really needed back up, she could always depend on Sonic and his friends to help... "I guess you guys are right on that one," Jill said, opening her eyes again. Then she turned away and walked.

"Brownie?" Brick said.

"I need to rest," Jill replied, without stopping. "...so I can prepare..." and she was gone out of the room.

Watching Jill leave, the agents let out a sigh, leaving the room in silence. Then...

"...I... I'll help her!" Hearing that, everyone glanced towards Miser, who had stood up from her seat, a determined look in her eyes.

"...Miser?" Ripper uttered.

"I may not have powers like Jill, Johnny or Metal Sonic..." Miser uttered, as she clenched her hands together. "...but there has been no force that could put me to rest, thus far. Shouldn't that help Jill out somewhat?"

Hunter knew the way Miser was, and to be honest, her reason was fair.

"I'm coming too," Brick said. "Ain't no way I'm letting her go alone again..."

"Don't forget about us!" Ani cut in, as she, Milo , Striker, Buddy and Jack entered into the room. Ani showed a big toothed grin.

Hunter was pretty surprised. "Ani?"

"You're all going?" Queen uttered. "It could get dangerous..."

"If that's the case..." Wiper suddenly said, as he folded his arms. "...then we should provide them with cover."

"Yeah!" Newt shouted, as he pumped his fist in the air. "We'll show that Johnny who the strongest is, y'know!"

"...he's going down." Natal said, as she cracked her neck.

"You guys as well?" King uttered in a stunned tone.

"Not just them either," Boomer said, with a grin. "I'm coming too."

"You can count on me joining as well," Cal added.

"...kekeke!" Ripper laughed. "If you're going, then I'm going, too! Kekekeke!"

"...I guess we have no choice." Queen hummed, as she glanced at King. "They'll need someone to watch over them... right?"

Looking at Queen, King rubbed the back of his neck, before... "...alright, I'm going, too!" he said.

"Well, if all of us are going..." Wiper said, before letting out a small sigh. "...then we should probably see if anyone else is interested, like the other robots..."

"I'm guessing that Sage coming along is a no-brainer, too." Miser nodded.

"Omega's in the basement," Boomer said. "He's been offline for awhile now; only because I've been giving him some upgrades, say, a few extra choices of weapons…It sure is fascinating how that mad doctor made his robots!"

"Well, shouldn't you go activate him then?" suggested Cal .

"Yeah, yeah, I'll get on that," Boomer grumbled at Cal , while leaving the room.

"I'm pretty sure that Whisker's somewhere in the building..." Natal hummed, as she tapped her chin. "Newt, can you look for him?"

"Right-o, Natal !" Newt nodded, as he went down the hall as well.

"...heh." Wiper actually chuckled, shaking his head. "I think this is the only time so many of us are going to fight against one enemy."

"We'd better make sure to make it a fight to remember!" King said with a laugh.

Meanwhile in another room, Tails, Charmy and Cream were sitting together, and for a good deal of the time they had been sitting there, all of them had been silent.

"…I can't believe it," Charmy finally said, breaking the uncomfortable

silence.

"...neither can I." Tails muttered, as he closed his eyes.

"…it isn't just the fact that we've seen their spirits…" Cream said. "… but Jill having had contact with them…and what just happened to Angel Island …"

"…it's eerie, is what it is," Charmy remarked.

"...indeed..." Tails nodded. "...it raises a lot of questions, to be sure..."

"…well," Charmy said, rising to a stand. "…are we going to sit here and talk about it…or are we going to finally do something?"

"Charmy?" Cream muttered in questioning.

"They said there was a final showdown with that Johnny character," Charmy said. "Why don't we contribute with what little fight we have left in ourselves?"

"...I don't see why not." Tails nodded, as he stood up as well. "But if that's the case, I'll need to go to the workshop, first, so I can stock up on proper equipment."

"Sounds good. Maybe I'll accompany you," Charmy said, smirking.

Cream let out a nervous sigh, "I've…never been much of a fighter…"

"You can help out the way you feel most comfortable about, Cream." Tails said with a friendly smile at her. "No one will hold it against you if you decide not to join us, so don't worry about it."

Cream smiled back at Tails. Brick popped into the room. "Professor, Captain, we-"

"We know," Charmy chuckled, cutting him off. "And we're joining too."

Brick tilted his head. "...really?"

"You kids have been fighting for our sakes a lot, these days." Tails said, before glancing at Brick with a smile. "But it wouldn't be fair if we elders didn't help out, would it?"

"Well just have to swing by Tails' workshop is all," Charmy said. "And we should probably take off now if we hope to come back in time," he said, walking out past Brick down the hall.

Watching Charmy leave, Brick looked back at Tails. "You guys going to be alright?" he asked. "I mean...after what happened..."

"...we'll manage." Tails said with a smile. "This isn't the only thing we've had to deal with in our lives, Brick."

"I guess it isn't," Brick said, smiling back.

Meanwhile down in the basement, Boomer had finished with the very last of the upgrades she had done before and just began activating Omega. "Hey, Omega, can you hear me?" she asked.

At first, she got no reply; however, after a while, the red robot cast a glance at her. ***"...I can hear you..."*** he uttered.

"Good," Boomer said, smirking. "How do you feel? I tinkered around and installed some new things into you, so you should notice at least some differences in your system..."

"...now that you mention it..." Omega hummed, slowly opening and closing his hands. ***"...what sort of modifications did you make to me?"***

"I gave you some new weapons," Boomer said proudly. "Not only that, but I revamped your targeting system and gave you various other upgrades, since you needed some. It had been awhile since you got a checkup, you know..."

"...indeed." Omega nodded. ***"Several decades has gone by since my last check-up..."***

"C'mon," Boomer said, turning for the stairs. "I'll brief you on what you've been missing..."

Brick, meanwhile, decided to quickly check on Jill, and maybe let her know that everyone had her back in this. Opening the door to the room he thought he saw Jill walk in before, he saw something buried under the covers. Probably Jill. With a smile, he walked up and sat on the bed, but at that moment, his smile fell. There was no weight pressed on the bed other than his, and he didn't hear the sound of anyone sleeping.

Frankly, he didn't hear anything.

Quickly pulling the covers back, he discovered to his horror that there was no Jill sleeping underneath; only pillows that had been arranged to look like it. Then he felt a cool breeze, which drew his eyes to the window which was open just a crack.

"...no..." He uttered, running up to the window. He didn't see her, but he could only assume that she had already taken off without them... "...Brownie, how could you?" he groaned, tearing himself away from the window and barging out of the room.

"BROWNIE'S GONE!" he cried through the halls.

The moment Brick uttered those two words, just about everyone within the building stopped what they were currently occupied with out of shock, before rushing towards where the voice had come from. "She's gone?" King said in disbelief.

"Don't tell me that she's gone off to Metropolis, already!" Sage groaned.

"But she couldn't have!" uttered Ani in despair. "She just can't leave like that!"

"It looks like she has," Brick answered.

"Well what are we waiting for?" Rudy declared. "We gotta go after her!"

"Tsch..." Shadow grunted, as he snapped his fingers. "...if Metal didn't already have all of the Chaos Emeralds, this wouldn't be as big a problem." Then, he glanced at Sage. "We'll be counting on you to get us there as fast as you can."

"It's going to be tough, though..." Sage muttered, as she rubbed the back of her head. "There's at least 20 people coming along, and I've never carried that many in one sitting, before."

"But we canna waste time!" Whisker shot in. "We`ve got t' help Jill ou'!"

"Wait a minute..." Brick suddenly thought about something, and a funny idea came into his head as he grinned. "I know someone in Future City that might have an airship..."

"Oi..." these two were giving Silver quite a headache, and he wished that Metal and Jill would finally get back soon. Otherwise, he might just stomp off and leave them behind.

"Is it...a grasshopper?" Flamenco guessed, looking at Lin with a questionable look about the silly game they've been playing.

"No, no, no, silly goose!" Lin laughed, as she shook her head. "Man, you suck at this game- no offense, though!" Then, she cracked her neck. "I'll give you a hint; it's not a bug!"

"...is it a rock?" Silver moaned.

"No, no!" Lin laughed. "It's still something that can move!"

"Aye...I give up," Flamenco muttered.

"Me too," Silver said.

"Silver!"

The hedgehog perked up when he heard that voice, and in his mind, he thanked the heavens above that she had come. He jumped to his feet just in time for her to walk right into the cave too. "Jill!" he said happily. "I guess things went well if you came back." Then he noticed something else. "...where's Metal?" he asked, tilting his head.

"He's in Metropolis, waiting for me," Jill answered. "I need your help

to get to Metropolis...quickly..." she trailed off after seeing the other two present. "...you two again?" she uttered in surprise.

"Hola, Senorita," Flamenco greeted with a bow.

"...h-hi..." Lin said, as she hid behind Flamenco, peeking out behind the toucan to look at Jill. "...s-sorry for intruding..."

Jill smiled. "You know, I never really caught your names."

"They're called Flamenco and Lin," Silver threw in, looking at them.

"It's... Marylin, actually." Lin shot in, as she scratched the back of her head. "Lin for short."

"I see," Jill said.

"But anyway, you said something about Metropolis?" Silver reminded.

"Right. I need your help to get there. Metal already has all the Chaos Emeralds so I can't simply warp there," Jill replied.

"But why is he in Metropolis?" Silver asked. "I mean, what happened?"

Jill turned away uneasily. "...long story," she replied hesitantly.

"So, you're headed to Metropolis, then?" Lin said in a more chipper tone. "In that case, mind if me and Flammy here tag along?"

Flammy? Flamenco thought to himself curiously, while Jill turned to them.

"I don't see why not," Jill answered.

"Alright, then let's go, already!" Lin said, as she pumped her fist into the air.

"I could donate my time to my swordsmanship after all," Flamenco commented, since he expected that there would be fighting.

Silver shook his head and rolled his eyes, but left outside the cave.

"C'mon." Jill wondered about him, but quietly followed him as well as Flamenco and Lin. Once outside, everyone was taken with a turquoise glow, and rose into the air slowly.

"Next stop, Metropolis," Silver said, rising them all higher and higher in the air along with himself.

"...Silver, there's something I should warn you about," Jill said. "Metal...went through some pretty drastic changes..."

"...changes? Of what kind?" Silver asked, quickly glancing back at her.

"...you'll see when we get there," was all Jill could really say. Silver raised an eyebrow to this, but decided to take her word for it. Once they rose high enough, the four of them shot through the sky and flew away.

A loud, obnoxious knock was heard on the door, and Gale started complaining when she heard it again. "I'm coming already!" she yelled, just as she opened the door. Then her annoyance vanished.

"Hiya, Gale," Brick greeted, while trying to catch his breath. "Listen...you think you could do us a BIG favor?"

Gale was surprised. Not only were Brick, Whisker and the kids here, but there was Team Alpha, Team Chaotix (minus Charmy) Omega, and even Lock standing there. The former GUN agents weren't here simply because they couldn't venture out into the public willy nilly.

"...Punk!" Gale called back, without taking her eyes off of them. "I think you'd better go wake up Grandpa!"

"Sheesh, what are ya..." Punk muttered, as he walked towards the door, only to stop short once he saw everyone outside. "...I'm on it!" he said, before bolting towards Jet's bedroom.

"...what's the favor?" Gale asked.

"We need to get to Metropolis!" Rudy suddenly burst out, making

Gale flinch.

"...M...Metropolis?" She wondered why in the world they were going there. "...Uh, come in! Come in!" she urged suddenly, stepping aside and allowing everyone to hurry in.

Once they got in, they saw Punk and Jet descend down the stairs, the elderly goshawk suddenly reeling back upon seeing so many in the living room. "...when I said that you could come for dinner, I didn't expect you to invite everyone you know!" he said in a surprised tone.

"Actually..." Lock uttered, as he folded his arms. "...we're here for something else."

"In order to get to Metropolis," Brick started. "We were hoping that you'd give us a ride in your airship..."

"...Our airship?" Gale questioned in disbelief.

"...ride our airship...?" Jet uttered, as he scratched his head. "What in blazes are you all going to do in Metropolis?"

"Didn't you say your airship was in a basement or something?" Brick asked.

"Yeah, but what are you-" Gale was left unanswered as the gang rushed past her, finding the door to the basement and hurrying down the stairs. "Hey, guys, wait!" she cried, running after them.

"Son of a-"

"Punk, what have I told you about swearing in my house?" Jet grumbled, as he followed Gale down the stairs. "You kids wait right there! I'm the only one who gets to pilot that ship!"

"...geez..." Punk sighed, before he ran after the group as well.

"Would you guys just tell us already?" Gale yelled, but she was unheard, as the group made it to the damp, dark basement.

"Where's the light?" Ani asked, grouping the walls to finally find the

large switch, and flip it on.

Once she flipped it, the group would see the massive airship standing before them, actually looking in pretty good shape, putting its age aside. The only thing that actually showed that it was out of use was a thick layer of dust covering it from top to bottom.

"...well, that's an airship." Wiper hummed, as he observed the airship.

"Alright, now are you going to tell us what the hell you're going to do over in Metropolis, already?" Jet said with an annoyed tone, without noticing Punk muttering to himself about hypocrisy.

"We're going after Brownie," Brick said bluntly.

Gale blinked. "...oh, you mean Jill," she said, since the nickname was off-putting. "Wait, so why is Jill going to Metropolis?"

"She's meeting up with Metal Sonic to go fight Johnny!" Striker said, making both Gale and Punk shake a tad.

"…what did you say?" Gale uttered.

"Yeah, you heard us," Brick said, rolling his eyes.

"...Johnny?" Punk uttered. "You mean... that guy who was with Callous?"

"That would be him, yes." Lock nodded.

"...then... what happened to Callous? Isn't she gonna try and beat her, too?" Punk said in a confused tone.

Brick pinched his eyebrows in annoyance. "…look dude, it's been one hell of a morning for us, but if you want the whole story, you're going to have to come with us and let us explain on the way," he said.

"What do you pipsqueaks think we're going to?" Jet said, as he pointed at Brick. "I told you; I'm the only one who can fly this beauty! No one else has my permission!"

"Then climb aboard and get it running, Gramps!" Ani said. "We haven't got much time to lose!"

"...keh... you're a cheeky one, you know that?" Jet muttered, as he began moving towards the airship. "Fine, I'll get it running for ya; just climb aboard after me! Gale, open the hatch!"

"Right," Gale said, doing just that without any arguments, allowing Jet inside of it and finally everyone else.

"There it is," Jill murmured. "...Metropolis." Indeed, Silver and the others were just coming up to the large abandoned city that was on their horizon. Silver slowly and carefully landed them toward the heart of the city, and Flamenco took a look around.

"This place is creepier than Westopolis," he commented.

"...Westopolis was creepy?" Lin hummed, as she looked around. "Now... where do we go?"

"Follow me," Jill said, as she walked toward that tall tower in the distance. They all said nothing, and followed her as instructed, as they entered inside the tower and began climbing up. At least, I think he should be in here, she thought to herself.

However, after a while, the way ahead of them was suddenly sealed off. "Hm? Where did the way go?" Lin uttered.

"...I didn't expect you to bring guests, Jill." Metal's voice suddenly said over a couple of speakers.

"Oh..." Jill murmured a little nervously. "...well, they happened to be with Silver, and I didn't feel it was right to leave them behind..." then she peered down at the ground guiltily. I probably shouldn't have brought them though... she thought.

"...no matter." Metal muttered. *"Just have them be cautious; we won't know what he'll plan on doing if he notices anyone but you and me there, Jill."*

"...so..." Lin uttered, as she rubbed the back of her head. "...can we come up?"

"You may not." Metal replied again. *"I'd prefer not to be disturbed during our flight."*

Jill's head shot back up hearing that. "Flight?"

"You'll see." Metal chuckled. *"It'll probably take a few minutes, so you should be patient. Perhaps you could wait outside in the meantime?"*

"Yeah! Because Big Bro has a surprise ready!" Tails Doll's voice suddenly chimed in as well.

"Alright," Jill said, turning and leaving immediately.

And Flamenco gave her a weird look as the rest of them followed. *The chica is incredibly obedient toward Metal Sonic,* he thought.

"I wonder what he's got planned, though..." Lin hummed, as she rubbed her chin. "...you think he's building a plane?"

"We'll probably find out what it is soon enough," Silver said, though Jill remained pretty quiet about it. Finally, they were outside, and they stood there looking around to see if anything would happen now.

After a while, something actually began happening, as a tremor shook the city, though not too violently.

"Wh-what's going on?" Lin uttered nervously, staying close to Flamenco. "E-earthquake?"

"No, it's not an earthquake," Jill said calmly. "...but it's probably something big."

"What could it be...?" Lin uttered, as the tremor continued for a while, before eventually ceasing.

Then, all of a sudden, on the very edge of the city, one could hear the earth crack, as something seemed to rise up from the ground.

All of them except Jill were shocked; Jill surprisingly remained calm through all of this, awaiting what would happen.

Soon, however, as the ground around the city started to sink below them, it became just what was rising out from the ground; namely, the whole city was being elevated out of the earth, propelled by what sounded like jet turbines.

"...so..." Lin uttered, as she looked around her. "...when he said something about flying..."

"He meant some serious flying!" Silver uttered.

"Does he really intend to take the entire city with him?" Jill wondered.

"He's not only taking the city with him..." At that point, something small perched itself on Jill's head. *"...but the very ground its built on! This is one of the reasons Big Bro needed the Chaos Emeralds... to turn Metropolis into a massive, flying fortress!"*

Jill looked up to see Tails Doll on her head. "...is this what Eggman left behind for Metal?" she asked. "A flying fortress?"

"It's one of the things, actually!" Tails Doll said, as he tilted his head. *"But Big Bro doesn't want anyone to know about the rest before he uses them..."*

"...how did that Eggman make a flying fortress out of the city, anyway?" Lin hummed, as she looked at Tails Doll, who simply shrugged.

"...I'm sure that man was capable of a lot of things," Jill said, while looking out at the sky they were taking off in.

"...but just where are we going?" Lin hummed, as she looked around her.

"We're gonna go beat Johnny, of course!" Tails Doll said. *"Big Bro's been absolutely determined to take him down, ever since we got here! He even had me use my fear-gas against him, to stay prepared!"*

"...he had you use fear gas against him?" Jill asked. She would've asked just what fears Metal had, but she bit her tongue. That was a pretty personal question, and she knew Metal wouldn't want these strangers to know what fears he had.

"Yeah..." Tails Doll nodded, as he glanced up at the highest tower in the city.

"Eeh? You're serious, Big Bro?" Tails Doll uttered in surprise, as he looked at Metal, who was sitting by a computer, a serious look on his face.

"...indeed." Metal nodded. "I cannot allow what inner fears this transformation has awakened to become a hindrance to me... so I need to conquer my fears. But to discover them... I need you to spray me with your fear gas."

"...it could end up damaging you beyond repair, Big Bro..." Tails Doll uttered. "...I don't wanna hurt you..."

"...if this body gets damaged, I doubt that simply repairing it will do me any good..." Metal hummed. "...do it."

Gulping, Tails Doll eventually nodded, before his gem opened up, letting the orange gas float into the room, forcing Metal to inhale it.

Once Metal had inhaled enough of it, soon enough, he found himself in a dark void. ...now... what will happen here? he thought, just as he glanced down at himself... but to his surprise, he couldn't make out his own features, as if he were invisible. ...what?

Then, as he looked up, he suddenly saw two versions of him glaring at each other; one of them being his humanoid form, and the other, his Neo Metal Sonic form.

"Oh my, there's certainly a conflict here, isn't there?" spoke a voice out of random.

Blinking, Metal looked around him. "...Tails Doll?" he uttered, before looking back at the two versions of himself. Upon closer inspection, he could see that the Metallix version of himself was covered in an aura of Corruption, and his humanoid version was covered in an

aura of Purity.

"Forced to chose only one side?" the voice guessed. "That is a dilemma..."

Blinking, Metal looked around him. "...would you elaborate?" he said.

"Well, the way I see it, you aren't sure whether or not to return to who you were once before, or become someone entirely unlike who you used to be," the voice clarified.

Then other voices entered in, but they were memories. "Why, what else is there for him to make of himself? He was created as my servant, and there isn't a thing in the world that can change that; not even my death!" Eggman's voice. Then, "...I already knew he might have killed me. Even now, I know he might kill me...but I still trust him." Jill's voice.

Blinking, Metal kept looking around him. "...what are you-"

In that instant, all of a sudden, both of the Metal's clashed, the human Metal brandishing a sword of Purity, and the metallic Metal simply using his body as a weapon, Corruption coating his arms and legs.

"But the fight is hard to take," The voice continued. "It's tearing you from the inside out."

"...kkh..." Watching the battle between the two forces, Metal was at a loss for words. Soon, however, he saw that the forces powering the two Metals was slowly, but surely, changing them further; Purity seemed to turn the humanoid Metal more angelic in appearance, whilst Corruption turned the metallic Metal into a more demonic version.

"I don't understand anything about machines; I lived a pretty sheltered life if you ask me, but I was taught that life in all shapes and sizes is precious. At first we conflicted, but later I saw something in Metal. I didn't see someone who's sole purpose was to obey the commands of a dictator or to take the life of their image. I

saw someone...who was trapped. Like me." Jill's voice again, dictated from the memory of that meeting with Eggman...

"...trapped?" Eggman uttered, before laughing. "What nonsense! Why would a machine feel trapped? Girl, you do not cease to amaze me! What makes you think that you know anything about Metal Sonic? He's my creation, and I created him to be a killing machine! The only thing you're seeing about him is an corrupted A.I, damaged by that very force you can utilize!"

"Which path do you choose? Or will you ever be able to choose between the two?" the voice questioned.

"...I..." Metal uttered, as he held his head, the clash between the two forces escalating even further.

After a while, however... "...I... have made my decision."

"And...?" the voice inquired.

"...to choose between being the hero... or the villain..." Metal uttered, as he approached the two beings before him. "...it's a choice I thought I'd never have to go through with. But..." Then, as he stopped right in front of the beings, Metal looked up at them. "...does the choice have to be between the two? What would stop me... from choosing to be both?"

"Good question," the voice replied, "and the answer is, that nothing can stop you from choosing that...from choosing to be entirely neutral between the two."

"After all, you have to find your purpose...right?" That voice was different than the one that had spoken, and Metal could suddenly see Jill's image appear, looking directly at him. It was her voice that he heard.

"...Jill..." Metal uttered, as he looked back at Jill. As he did that, finally, the two entities stopped fighting, as they looked back at Metal as well. "...you're right. I need to find my... purpose."

Nodding, Metal approached the two entities, placing his hands on them. "And thus... I accept the responsibilities of both a villain... and

a hero."

Jill nodded with a smile of understanding...and then darkness suddenly began to consume her. "Whatever you chose, I will respect your choice," she continued to speak.

Seeing Jill become consumed, Metal's eyes shot open, as both the entities looked towards Jill as well. "...no, wait! Don't leave me! Not again!" Quickly, all three Metals rushed towards the ewe, all of them trying to reach Jill before the darkness would consume her.

They managed to make it to Jill in time to take her hand, but it was almost as if she didn't bother to hold tight. Her grip was slipping away, little by little. "Metal," her voice echoed softly...

"Jill!" Metal yelled again, as he quickly grabbed hold of Jill's hand with as much force as he could muster, attempting to pull her out of the dark. "I'm not going to lose you again, Jill!" he called, as the other Metals aided him in trying to pull Jill out.

Slowly but surely, he was succeeding in pulling her out of the dark, catching a glimpse of her face, and her compassionate eyes, as she looked right at Metal. But it was the last he would see, because her hand finally slipped out of their grip, and she was gone.

"JILL!" Seeing that happen, Metal was crushed, as he sank to his knees, his entire body shaking. "...no... no, no, not again!" he yelled desperately, looking around him. "Where did she go? WHERE?"

"What do you really intend to do, if you loose her again?" that previous voice returned. "Does she mean that much to you?"

"...I won't lose her again." Metal uttered, as he glared around him. "Even if I throw away my very existence... I swear, she's not going to die again! Not on my watch!"

"So you'd do anything to save her..."

Another image began to appear, and it was amazing. It looked like Jill, but she was somehow golden rather than brown. Her dress was torn and her jacket was gone, but she had these green bracelets around her wrists, and the same green halo over her head. There

was also a green ribbon that was intertwined around her arms, and extended out. One one side, she had a white, angelic wing, while the other side bore a demonic black wing. She looked like she was in sleep...

"...Jill...?" Metal uttered, as he slowly approached the sleeping Jill, both of the entities following him. "...yes... to save her... I'd do anything." he eventually said.

"Why?" the voice continued to question. "Why would you go so far to save her?"

"...I can't give you an answer to that..." Metal replied, still approaching Jill. "...except for one... I guess that... I need her."

Once Metal got close enough to Jill, she began to stir, and open her eyes, looking at Metal with a blank look. Eventually, a sweet, sympathetic smile grew on her face.

"...Jill..." Metal uttered, as he actually smiled as well, reaching out to Jill.

As Metal reached to her, Jill reached to him to the point that their fingers touched. "Metal..." her mouth didn't even move, but it was her voice. "Even if I'm gone from this world...I will always be with you..."

"...Jill..." Metal uttered again, as he closed his eyes. "...thank you..."

Metal for a minute felt her arms around him in a close hug. "You're welcome," she spoke softly again, just in time for the warm embrace to be gone, and so was she, leaving Metal alone in the dark void.

"...Jill..." Metal uttered, before looking upwards. "...I swear... we'll get through this... both of us!"

At that point, the dark void around him shattered, and Metal once again found himself in the same chamber, Tails Doll looking worriedly at him.

"...Big Bro?" Tails Doll uttered, as he tilted his head. "...are you..."

"...I'm fine." Metal nodded, before looking at Tails Doll with a small smile. "Don't worry about me."

...Big Bro... Tails Doll thought, still looking up at the tower. Despite what Metal had said, what Tails Doll had seen Metal go through under the influence of the gas still worried him.

Meanwhile, Jill had just got done explaining the entire story of what happened this morning to the three of them, and they all looked at her with baffled looks once she was finished.

"...you were dead?" Silver uttered.

Jill nodded. "But Callous and I joined together and I was brought back to life...and now somehow, I can control Unity." She opened her hand for a ball of dark green energy to suspend over it.

"Aah, pretty..." Lin uttered, as she looked at the sphere with interest. "...b-but man... I can't believe that you actually died... that's kind of bizarre to think about."

"It kind of is," Jill answered, looking at herself to really think about the fact that this body was stone cold once.

"...but you've been able to tap into Callous, haven't you?" Flamenco asked. "If you have used her weapons, and spoken that language...surely there is more you can do..."

"I need to figure out what I'm capable of before I fight Johnny," Jill said. "So I guess I could start figuring out if I can do that..."

"Maybe you should..." Lin nodded, as she scratched her head with her left arms. "...but man... Johnny sounds really powerful. Is it really smart of us to tag along?"

"Well, whether or not it is, it is too late," Flamenco said, as Jill took Tails Doll off her head and setting him on the ground. "We can't very well leave with the city in flight..."

"Alright, I'm going to concentrate," Jill said, standing with her feet apart in a stance, and closing her eyes.

"...so, what are we looking out for, again?" Lin hummed, as she glanced at Tails Doll.

"According to Big Bro..." Tails Doll uttered, as he glanced at Lin. *"...we're going to fly right towards a gathering of storm clouds. Johnny's supposed to be hidden there."*

"...a storm," that sounded familiar to Silver, and by then he made a connection. "...I thought that storm wasn't normal," he murmured to himself, remembering the exact storm that had stricken Jill with lightning. Although his attention couldn't help but be pulled toward Jill, when Unity began to emit off her entire body.

Then something strange started to happen. Gradually that dark green energy somehow got darker...

...it even gained a bit of a demonic air.

"...J...Jill?" Silver uttered, getting the others to look as well.

Jill ignored him, as she retained a steady, deep breathing. The expression on her face turned into a deadly serious look; an expression that wasn't like her at all. Then when she reopened her eyes, they all saw that her eyes had changed color.

They were blood red.

"...um... is it supposed to do that?" Lin uttered, as she stepped away from Jill.

"Jill?" Gulping, Tails Doll fluttered a bit closer to Jill. *"...are you... alright?"*

Jill didn't answer Tails Doll. Instead, her eyes turned to Silver. "...Attack me," she ordered in such an icy cold tone that was, again, so unlike her. It was enough to throw Silver off severely.

"Wha?"

"I said, attack me," she hissed. "Attack me like you're trying to kill me."

"Jill?" Tails Doll uttered in shock. *"Why would you want-"*

"Okay!" Lin said in a confident tone, as she quickly removed her coat, finally revealing her three, crippled right arms.

"WOAH!" Tails Doll uttered once he saw the metal arm, the flail-arm and the lone stump of an arm on Lin's right side. " *What happened to you?"*

"She wants us to attack her, right?" Lin said with a grin, before running at Jill. "Just don't get too hurt, now!" she called, before swinging the flail on her uppermost right arm at the ewe.

What everyone would quickly notice was that Jill somehow mysteriously vanished right before she would be crushed by Lin's flail.

"Huh? W-Where did she go?" Silver uttered.

It didn't even give Lin the opportunity to look. Something suddenly popped out of the ground at Lin's side. By the time Lin figured out it was Jill kicking her in the face, Lin was already knocked onto the ground harshly, and Jill stood there, looking upon Lin without any sympathy whatsoever.

"...Jill?" At this point, Tails Doll was mortified.

"...a challenge, eh?" Lin chuckled, wiping some blood off her lips, before getting on her feet, swinging her flail-arm about. "Well, why didn't you just say so? Let's dance, girl!" she laughed, before rushing at Jill again, wildly swinging the flail at the ewe.

Jill disappeared again, but this time everyone saw how she disappeared. She had sunk beneath the ground.

"Holy-!" Silver didn't expect that of Jill at all.

Again, she popped out of the ground beneath Lin, but this time she grabbed Lin, launched themselves into the air, and dealt a seismic toss onto Lin, plowing the poor spider into the ground. "Pathetic," she spat, standing above her again.

"...oh, really?" Lin chuckled, as if she wasn't hurt at all, before she suddenly grabbed hold of Jill with her left arms. "Then how about this?" Then, slamming her metallic gauntlet into the ground, Lin swung Jill over her head, before slamming the ewe into the crater she had created when crushing Lin into the ground.

Jill only looked at Lin coldly; she, too, unaffected by the move in any way. "Stop hesitating," she hissed again. "Try to kill me..." She kicked Lin again to release herself, and twisted over flexibly from her kick to gain footing.

"...it's almost as if she's acting like..." Flamenco murmured, recalling this type of fighting.

Both Jill's hands opened, and two weapons came at her disposal. One was her Holy Blade...and the other was that scythe that Callous wielded.

"...Jill..." Tails Doll uttered, as he hid behind Silver. *"...why are you..."*

"Hesitating?" Lin uttered, as she cracked her neck. "I'm going at you with all I got." Then, she glanced at Flamenco. "Flammy, gimme your sword."

Flamenco pulled out his rapier from his sheathe, and tossed it to her. "Careful, she is delicate," he warned.

"I'll be careful." Lin said with a nod, as she caught the rapier with one of her left arms, before looking at her arm stump, smirking.

"...what is she thinking of doing?" Tails Doll uttered, as he looked at Lin.

At that point, however, the spider did something no one had expected her to do; with one swift movement, Lin jabbed the hilt of the rapier right into the arm stump, making sure that it was properly stuck in it, before moving the arm stump so that the rapier's blade pointed at Jill. "Alright... ready?"

"...did she just do that?" Tails Doll uttered in surprise.

"Just come at me," Jill commanded impatiently, holding the two

weapons ready.

"Alright!" Lin nodded, as she ran right at Jill, swinging her flail at the ewe with full force.

Even with full force, Jill struck it away with the scythe, and with a turn, thrust the sword forward at Lin.

However, Lin was quicker, parrying the blow with her new-found rapier-arm. "Gotcha!" she laughed, as she quickly grabbed hold of both of Jill's arms, before swinging the flail right at Jill, aiming a blow for her skull.

And it hit. The spike was driven into her head, breaking the skin and creating a trail of blood from her head, running down. But Jill didn't even flinch. She only looked at Lin with the same cold look that she's had. Even scarier was that the trail ran down her cheek, and she actually took a lick of her own blood. "That's not good enough," she hissed again. Then she kicked Lin in the face again, and her legs were a perfect vertical 180 degree split.

However, in spite of being kicked, Lin didn't let go of Jill at all. "...man... you really can take a beating, can't ya?" the spider uttered, looking down at Jill.

"...I don't understand..." Tails Doll uttered, as he glanced at Silver. *"...why does Jill want us to try to kill her?"*

"Then let's try it again!" Lin called, before she began swinging the flail repeatedly at Jill, slamming it into her skull numerous times.

Jill took the flail to the head over, and over, and over again. With one final strike, Jill was knocked onto the ground. They all saw a big bloody gash on her head, while she lied there.

"Oh my God," Silver uttered. "Is she...?"

"Lin, what did you do?" Flamenco questioned in disbelief.

But before Lin could even answer, Jill opened her eyes. They were no longer blood red, but their original green again. Feeling something trickle down her head, she felt her forehead and saw

blood on her hand. "...what happened?" she muttered in shock.

"Jill!" Quickly, Tails Doll fluttered over to Jill, looking worriedly at her. *"Jill, why'd you tell her to do that? You really worried us!"*

Instantly, Lin seemed to shift outlook, as she could only look at Jill with a shocked look. "...oh... I-I'm really sorry! I didn't mean to..." At that point, she also noticed that Flamenco's rapier was still stuck in her arm. "...oh my... I r-really let loose, d-didn't I..."

"I-I'm alright," Jill said, taking her jacket and rubbing the blood away from her head. Once she finished wiping and took the jacket away, the gash was miraculously gone.

Silver's eyes widened. "How did...?"

"It healed," Jill answered. "Not as obvious as it used to be...but it healed up." Then she tried getting up. "...I blacked out," she said. "What happened?"

"...well..." Tails Doll began, as he scratched his head. *"...your eyes went all red on us, and... you asked us to come at you like we wanted to kill you..."*

"...and then..." Lin uttered nervously, looking away from Jill. "...I... kinda attacked you... I'm really sorry."

"And you were acting like that other chica," Flamenco said.

Jill tried to put it together. "You mean I acted like...Callous?" All of then nodded, and Jill's eyes widened. "...I may have literally tapped into her..."

"But that still doesn't explain why she wanted us to act like we would kill you," Silver said. "It seemed like she really wanted us to kill you."

"...or maybe..." Lin uttered, as she held her chin in thought. "...maybe she wanted us... to kill her, and not Jill?"

The more Jill thought about it, the more it connected. What if Callous really wanted to be dead? There could be a good reason for that, and Jill pretty much figured what it was, but as she recalled, she

didn't have the same attitude when the two of them ventured out of that chapel to revive Jill. "...very weird," Jill murmured. "But if anything, maybe I should hold off on tapping into her for now..."

"Yeah..." Lin nodded. "...I could sh-shift into being battle-ready the moment you tap into her, and... I don't want to hurt you again..."

Jill got lost in thought again. *Callous...you've either grown really desperate...or you are one deceptive little bitch.*

Chapter 83

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-THREE

"Wow! We're so high up!" Ani remarked, looking outside a window.

"Yeah, this is really something!" Jack chimed in, as he and the other kids were looking out of the windows as well, looking down at the ground that the airship was currently flying over. "I don't think I've ever been on something like this before!"

"Yeah, Gramps' airship really is somethin', huh?" Punk chuckled, as he and Gale walked towards the kids.

"Is this the same airship he flew when he was the leader of the Babylon Rogues?" Striker asked.

"It sure is," Gale said. "Grandpa has a lot of memories in this ship."

"Oh yeah...there's something I've been wanting to ask you two," Brick said, as he appeared into the room and approached Punk and Gale. "If Jet was your grandpa, then who was your grandma?"

"...you know, I keep forgetting her name." Punk muttered, as he rubbed his head. "Think it was Tek-something or another..."

"Yeah, we were kinda young when she died, so we don't really remember," Gale said. "We just always knew her as Grandma."

"I've got another question!" Ani said, raising her hand. "Are Wave and Storm still around?"

"Oh sure," Gale answered. "But they've kinda split up a long time ago, and we don't know where they are; neither does Grandpa..." Just then, the airship suddenly shook, sending everyone to the floor, and the shaking immediately stopped. "What was that?" she uttered.

"I don't know!" Jack blurted out, as he looked around. "What happened?"

"...is someone trying to board us?" Punk snarled, as he quickly got to his feet, rushing down the halls.

"During flight?" Gale said, following Punk. "C'mon Punk, don't be stupid!"

The others followed them, and as they ran, Brick thought about what they said. *If someone's trying to board us, and the ship is in the air...* He wasn't sure, but he had to see if what he thought was true.

After running for a while, the group eventually rounded a corner to where the opening hatch was... however, it was just closed, revealing seven figures standing before them; the GUN Agents, along with Shadow. "Sorry about that; I needed to rest my wings." Sage said with a chuckle.

"...what the hell...?" Punk uttered, as he looked at the group in utter shock.

"Ah, Sage, I thought it was you," Brick said.

"Wait a minute…aren't those the runaway GUN agents from the news?" Gale uttered shakily.

"Yep, and one of 'em's my dad!" Ani exclaimed, throwing her arms around Hunter.

Gale then gawked at Brick. "Just what kind of crowd do you guys roll with?"

Brick shrugged.

"...sheesh, you guys really are popular." Punk uttered, placing a hand against his head.

"Understatement of the century." Queen remarked, as she folded her arms.

"Well, now that we're here..." Shadow uttered, as he stepped forward. "...we'll all head towards Metropolis."

"I... gue- WAIT, WHY IS THE RHINO LOADED?" Punk suddenly

exclaimed, as he looked at Miser; as it turned out, not only was she carrying her railgun, but she also carried a ton of other weapons, including Newt's Stinger-model rocket launcher, his jetpack-and-flamethrower, and several of Boomer's inventions, just to name a few.

"...we need to be prepared." Miser said with a nod.

Just then, Team Alpha, Team Chaotix, Omega and Lock got there. "Guys! You've GOT to see what's outside!" Boomer said, pointing behind the way they came with a thumb.

"What is it?" Striker asked.

"It's Metropolis!" Cal answered. "But the city looks like its flying through the air!"

"WHAT?" Brick had to see this, and he pushed and shoved everyone away as he ran down the hall that the others had come from.

"...did he say that Metropolis was flying?" Jack uttered in shock.

"Kekekeke! He's not fibbing, either!" Ripper chimed in. "Sage noticed it flying through the air while we flew towards you guys! Kekekekeke!"

"It's probably best if you guys see for yourselves." Wiper hissed, as he pointed behind him, where Brick had ran off to. "Otherwise, you probably won't believe it."

That instant, everyone rushed through the halls, until they got to the very room that Jet was piloting the ship in. Everyone pressed against the windows and looked out with shocked looks on their faces.

Like they had said, the city itself seemed to be flying through the air without a care in the world…

"…whoa…" Milo uttered, watching it.

"...that Metal Sonic..." Jet uttered, shaking his head. "...what in the

world did he do this time...?"

"It doesn't matter." Lock said, as he glanced at Jet. "Take us towards the city."

"Are you nuts?" Punk said in shock. "It's probably loaded to the brim with weapons! If we go any closer-"

"He will not open fire." Omega uttered, as he clenched his hands into fists.

"What?" Gale muttered.

"Even if he didn't expect us coming, he won't shoot us," Brick said. "See if you can land in the city, Jet..."

"...alright, I'll try..." Jet muttered, as he steered the airship towards the city. "But I swear, if we get shot down, you guys need to pay for the damages!"

"If we survive, that is..." Punk uttered, as he folded his arms.

"Oh, quit worrying," Boomer groaned, despite talking to an elder. "We intend to take good care of you guys..."

"Besides, it'll be fun to get a taste of the adventure that we've had for the past 2 weeks," Brick added, which made Gale look at him.

"...2 weeks?" she murmured.

"Long story." Sage shrugged, as she looked ahead of them. *Now... what else does Metal Sonic have in store?* she thought.

Slowly but surely, the ship was able to get closer to the flying city without any trouble, with everyone looking carefully around of course…

And while looking, Brick suddenly spotted a group of individuals standing around. He made out a spider…a toucan…a white hedgehog?

Then he saw her. "Brownie!"

"Where?" Milo asked, looking around quickly.

"Over there!" Brick said with a point. "Land there!"

Meanwhile, down on the streets of the city, Flamenco happened to glance up. "Something is coming our way," he said, causing the others to look.

"What's an airship doing here?" Silver wondered.

"Waah... it's huge!" Tails Doll uttered, as he looked up at the ship.

"Who could it be...?" Lin hummed, as she placed her left hands on her left hip.

All of them watched silently as the ship finally made it to a landing spot a good distance away from them. The ship barely touched the ground before the hatch popped open, and one lone person hopped out in a frantic run for them.

That same one grabbed Jill by the shoulders. "Brownie, how could you leave us behind like that?" Brick uttered.

"What?" Jill sputtered, blinking.

"You heard him." At that point, most of the airship's passengers disembarked, rushing towards where Jill and the others were. "You had us worried, Jill." Sage nodded.

Lin could only blink. "...Flammy, th-there's so many people..." she uttered.

Jill suddenly spotted a certain two from the crowd that disembarked; Punk and Gale. At first, she was going to ask who they were, but then she got a funny feeling. A feeling that she already knew them somehow…

…and once a few memories flashed in her mind, she suddenly knew.

"…Brick, what are they doing here?" she asked, pointing to Punk and Gale.

"…what do you mean?" Brick uttered, looking back. "Brownie, you sound like you've met them before."

"I haven't," Jill said. "…but Callous has."

Gale's mouth hung open in shock. *How does she know?* She thought.

Punk, too, was baffled by Jill knowing this . *She wasn't even there!* He thought.

"So, where's Metal?" Lock inquired, as he glanced at the group.

"Right now, he's flying." Tails Doll said. *"We can't disturb him."*

"Figures..." King muttered, as he folded his arms. "So, we'll just have to wait, then."

Meanwhile, Brick turned to look at Punk and Gale again. "…so, how does Callous know the two of you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Uh…um…" Gale was pretty much at a loss for words.

"...she and Johnny were in Future City the night after we first met." Lock eventually chimed in. "I fought Callous, and... these two decided to get involved."

Shooting a glare at Lock, Punk let out a sigh.

"I see," Jill answered, and with a quick sight of those memories, it confirmed the veracity of what Lock said. Then she looked up at him. "I don't think I've ever really met any of you…I'm Jill."

Gale swallowed with a nod to her. "I'm Gale," she said. *So she's really Jill…* she thought in the back of her head.

"The name's Punk." Punk nodded, as he folded his arms.

"...Lock the Sniper." Lock muttered, as he tipped his hat to Jill.

"Bounty hunter."

Jill became interested when she heard Lock's title. I wonder if he's related to Fang…

"And this is our Grandpa," Gale said, gesturing to Jet.

Jill looked at Jet a minute. "…I know you," she said. "You're Jet the Hawk, aren't you?"

"...that would be me." Jet nodded. "So, you're Jill? I take it that you've heard of me from stories Tails told ya, right?"

"Yeah," Jill answered.

Hunter looked over the other three that were there. He knew Flamenco and Lin already, but he took a long look at Silver. "...who are you?" he asked.

"...well, no one of any importance, really," Silver shrugged. When he looked at Sage, somehow, he got the feeling that his mind was being probed...and he couldn't help but set up psychic barriers around his mind for caution. *Anything to keep the time flow safe from any chance of paradox...* he thought.

While Sage did glance at the hedgehog, it seemed only to be for a second, as she looked away from him.

"Where's Captain Charmy, and the Professor?" Jill asked.

"They had to go to the Professor's workshop to get some things," Brick said. "They wanted to come too."

Jill's eyes widened in surprise, and she looked at all of them. "I thought...you guys didn't want to come..."

"Hey, you've been risking your ass on your own for too long, Jill!" King laughed, as he folded his arms. "I think it's time we all pitched in to help ya!"

"...we all should be able to help you and Metal out in beating Johnny, right?" Miser said with a small smile.

Jill didn't know what to say, and with everyone smiling at her, she could only smile herself.

"Hey look! Isn't that the Professor's plane?" Rudy exclaimed with a point, which made Silver jump.

"What?" the white hedgehog murmured.

Indeed, everyone could see Tails' biplane fly towards the island, carrying not only the old fox himself, but also Charmy. "...yeah, that's the Professor's plane." Sage nodded, folding her arms.

"That makes all of us, then." Natal hummed.

As the plane came closer to the island, Tails Doll glanced at Silver. *"...are you alright?"* he inquired.

Silver wasn't quite sure what to do at this point, and he let out a sigh*. It looks like I'm trapped,* he thought. "...I'll be alright," he finally answered Tails Doll, as they watched the plane.

Soon enough, the biplane made a landing within the city, coming to a stop not too far from the airship. After it stopped, its two passengers disembarked the plane, walking towards the group.

"You guys made it!" Rudy cheered, hopping up and down.

"Yep," Charmy said. "Although I must say…I wasn't expecting Metropolis flying through the air like this…"

"Neither did we," Brick answered.

Gale, meanwhile, tugged on Punk. "It's them," she said. "Professor Prower, and Captain Charmy…"

"...yeah..." Punk nodded. "...hard to believe..."

"Metal certainly didn't waste his resources..." Tails hummed, as he looked around him.

"And he's got lots more in store!" Tails Doll chimed in, fluttering towards the old fox. *"But I can't tell you what he's got ready; he*

wants it to be a surprise."

"Of course..." Charmy murmured. Then he met eyes with Jet the Hawk. "Well, what do you know...haven't seen you in a long time, Jet."

"...likewise." Jet muttered, regarding a nod to the old fox and bee. "So, how have you been holdin' up?"

"We've been doing fairly well," Charmy answered. "We've definitely gotten busier with some recent events…" and then his eye caught Silver, and they widened. "Well, there's another surprise," he said.

"…Charmy? Is that you?" Silver said, obviously amazed at the age the old bee was. Last he remembered, he didn't see Charmy since he was 6. The reaction was the same with Tails.

"...Silver?" Tails uttered, as he approached the grey hedgehog. "...how on earth did you..."

"...I think he time-traveled." Lin shrugged, which caused everyone to look at her. "...w-well, that's what I got from while we were watching-" Quickly, she clasped her hands over her mouth.

"...I see. So that's how it is." Sage hummed, eying Flamenco and Lin. "Just how long have you two been spying on Jill and Metal's training sessions? Don't answer that, by the way; I already know."

"You've been spying on us?" Jill suddenly said, looking quickly at Flamenco and Lin.

"Eh…" Flamenco looked away. "…Si, we have been watching you…"

"...w-we're sorry. It's just..." Lin began, looking away from Jill. "...I got really curious as to why you were carrying Metal through the cave during that storm... so I convinced Flammy to stay in the area, so we could keep an eye on what you did..."

"...so you saw absolutely everything that transpired while they trained?" Sage hummed.

"...y-yeah." Lin nodded, a guilty look on her face.

"…really?" While Jill wasn't going to hold anything against them, the idea of it was just sort of uncomfortable. She was even a little embarrassed…things happened that she didn't exactly want to share with the others.

"How did Silver get tied up into this though?" Charmy asked curiously.

"…Metal was in the process of creating what is Unity now," Jill said. "But something happened. The Corruption reacted to the Chaos Energy and…well, ripped a hole in time and yanked Silver here."

"...so Metal brought Silver here..." Tails hummed, as he folded his arms. "...curious."

"...hm?" At that point, Lock had glanced away from the group, noticing something in the distance.

"Lock?" Brick said, seeing this. "What's up?"

"...look." Lock said dryly, as he pointed ahead of them.

As everyone would see, they were slowly, but surely, approaching the strange formation of clouds, which was hovering above the sea. "...is that it, Jill?" Sage inquired, as she glanced at the ewe.

Jill looked with a solemn silence, watching as the entire city was heading toward those clouds. "…yes, it is," she answered with a deep breath. "…this is it."

"...then, he's there...?" Miser uttered, gulping.

"Kekekekeke! Time to finish it!" Ripper chimed in, brandishing his blades.

"No need to worry, Jill..." King said, as he smirked. "...we got this!"

At that point, however, Shadow's eyes widened, as he eyed the storm. "...everyone, brace yourselves!" Just as Shadow called that, everything seemed to go silent for just a moment, as everyone

looked towards the storm. Then, it began contorting, before dark lightning shot out from it, slowly encasing the entire castle within a massive, dark sphere.

"What on earth..." Queen uttered, as she looked at this with a shocked look.

Just then, a massive shockwave suddenly erupted from the sphere, flying right above the city; while it wasn't at the right altitude to hit the city, everyone was knocked down when the wave passed over them.

"...is this Johnny's doing?" Jack uttered, as he looked at the storm ahead of them.

"...we'll find out once we enter the storm." Wiper scoffed, as he hissed.

"Johnny, what have you done?" Jill uttered, although those words came out before she realized it, almost as if she wasn't the one saying them.

Before anyone could question her, suddenly, the floating city picked up speed, approaching the storm much quicker now. "...what's Metal doing? We're gonna crash, y'know!" Newt uttered in panic.

"...we will break through." Omega uttered with a nod.

"Fer all our sakes, I hope ye`re right..." Whisker muttered, as the ship finally got close enough to the storm to enter it. Strangely, even with the dome around it, they entered it without a problem. The storm itself was terrible; shaking the very grounds of the city everyone stood on so much that they all had to hold onto each other to keep from losing their footing; only a few didn't need to cling to each other, namely King, Queen, Wiper, Lock, Omega and Shadow. The lightning snapped at them, scaring the children and Punk and Gale. Shadow glanced up towards the highest tower in the city of Metropolis... where he swore that he could see someone standing. *...who is...* he thought.

Strangely, no one else but Jill started to hear something.

A small ringing pitch...

"...ow..." the sound started to get to her, hurting her ears as Jill held her head.

By then everyone emerged from the clouds into that everlasting darkness.

Gale's eyes widened at the sight she saw. "Oh...my...god..."

Now, the castle looked in even worse condition than when Jill had last seen it. The entire castle was darkened, as if nothing more than a shadow, and massive spikes were jutting out from the various towers scattered about. Every once in a while, dark lightning crackled around the structure, and flames of pure Corruption were burning along the top of the castle.

"...unbelievable..." Punk uttered in shock.

"...to think that he could do this..." Sage uttered with a shudder.

Jill looked up at this sight in the same disbelief…and she was the first one to become angry at this sight. "…my mother's castle…" she growled, which drew Gale's attention.

Mother? She remembered that night when Lock was wounded and that woman that came to them…could this really be her castle?

Jill then saw some incoming gargoyles coming after them, and she charged for them in a run. Brick was startled to see her sock one of the gargoyles in the face with a fist, and snare its snout in Unity energy that acted like a rope. Then she mounted onto its back, and brought out Callous' whip to lash it on, while using the Unity rope like reigns.

The gargoyle could do nothing else but obey, turning around and taking Jill through the air toward the tallest tower.

"…She's bold," Gale admitted, although some other Gargoyles headed for them now.

"Incoming!" Cal called out.

"Tsch... let's get them!" King growled, as his body sparked with

electricity.

"No need." they suddenly heard a voice call, which made everyone look towards the highest tower... and what they saw startled them.

There, standing on the tallest spire, with his arms folded, was none other than Metal, though now, he was in his Neo form, rather than the humanoid one. "... *Johnny is about to feel the true might..."* Then, the Metallix stretched his arms out, glaring at the incoming gargoyles. *"...of the Metal Sonic Empire!"*

The moment he said that, from every corner of the city, a swarm seemed to rocket out at the gargoyles, firing a hail of bullets at them. "...hn?" Punk could only utter, as he saw just what this swarm consisted of; from Buzzbombers to Shadow Androids, this swarm was a gathering of every single type of robot Eggman had ever created... and they all attacked the incoming gargoyles.

"This is wicked!" Rudy said, watching all the robots take down the gargoyles.

"This is….this is incredible!" Gale uttered, watching everything going on. "Is this really what you guys went through in the past 2 weeks?"

"Actually, It wasn't really this intense before," Boomer replied, pulling out one of her custom guns to fire on some of the gargoyles as well. "But I can say that it's not a first for us!"

As Jill continued to fly that gargoyle through the air toward the castle, she winced from the ringing she kept hearing; almost as if the closer she got to the castle, the louder the ringing got. "Ow…" she moaned.

"Jill!" At that point, Jill noticed a small plushie fluttering by her side, looking at her. *"Jill, you're not gonna face off against Johnny on your own, are you? He could be really dangerous, now!"*

Jill didn't look at Tails Doll, and she tried to ignore the ringing she heard as she continued to wince. "I have to get to him as quickly as possible," she answered the doll.

"...but what if he tries something with you ?" Tails Doll said worriedly. *"If Big Bro's not there to stop him, he might-"* At that point, a dark fireball suddenly passed right over Tails Doll, startling the plushie. *"...eh?"*

As it turned out, from the walls of the castle itself, fireballs made from pure Corruption were launched at Jill and Tails Doll, zooming past them at an incredible speed.

Jill held the reigns with one hand and grabbed Tails Doll; gritting her teeth to keep the ringing from getting to her. "Hang on, Tails Doll!" she called, making the gargoyle do a spinning nose dive to loose the fireballs of Corruption.

"WOAH!" Tails Doll yelped, as he watched the fireballs pass by them. *"How is he doing that?"*

"You can do a lot of things with Corruption," Jill said, heading toward the courtyard. "But it doesn't look like we can get directly to where we want from outside. We'll have to climb our way up from the inside!" Jill then grabbed Tails Doll completely and hopped off the gargoyle, landing in the courtyard as the fireballs of Corruption chased the gargoyle, and eventually shot it down.

"...man..." Tails Doll uttered, before he glanced back, seeing the robots make quick work of the gargoyles. *"...I hope the others will be alright."* he muttered, before looking up at Jill. *"...how are you going to beat him?"*

Jill didn't fully hear what Tails Doll said; she only heard the ringing. "…I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked, wincing again.

"...um..." Tails Doll uttered, as he tilted his head. *"...are you alright, Jill?"*

"I'll be fine," she said, walking ahead toward the entrance doors into the castle. "…just a small headache is all…" but the ringing still continued, and when she entered inside, it became a tad louder.

"...so, you finally show up." they heard a low, demonic voice utter. *"...like what I've done with the place?"*

"...is that Johnny?" Tails Doll uttered.

Somehow, whenever Johnny spoke, the ringing would subside and allow Jill to hear him, but the minute he finished, the ringing returned. "No, I don't like what you've done to my mother's castle," Jill answered, looking around. "…where are you Johnny?"

"Where I can see you." Johnny chuckled. *"Soon enough... I'll have gotten Callous back... who knows? Maybe I'll get rid of you in the same move? Or should I let Callous do away with you on her own?"*

Jill set Tails Doll onto the ground, and cringed this time. "…ow…" she moaned, covering her ears from the ringing she kept hearing.

"...Jill, you're not alright, are you?" Tails Doll said, as he glanced at Jill, before fluttering off the ground.

"I keep…I keep hearing something," Jill uttered, letting out another moan in agony at the pain of that ringing…

"...what are you hearing, Jill?" Tails Doll inquired, tilting his head.

"…it won't stop," Jill whined, having not heard Tails Doll. Now, it was starting to grow even louder, and Jill hyperventilated. "…stop it… stop it please!" she pleaded.

"Jill!" Seeing that, Tails Doll fluttered up towards Jill, placing his plush-hands on her face. *"Jill, pull yourself together! You can't let it get to you!"*

"Aaw, what's the matter?" Johnny chuckled, making Tails Doll look around him. *"Is the Corruption getting to you, Jill?"*

Now Jill screamed, "Stop it, PLEASE! Make it stop!" Unity appeared around her, but it started fading to a darker shade again.

"...Jill!" In desperation, Tails Doll suddenly smacked Jill across the face, hoping that it would cause her to snap out of it. *"Please, calm down!"*

The minute Tails Doll slapped her, the ringing somehow stopped. So

did her screaming, and that dark Unity aura was gone...she just sat there, not moving for a few moments. Then an angry look came across her face, and she looked at Tails Doll.

Her eyes were blood red again.

The moment he saw those eyes, Tails Doll was frightened beyond compare. *"...I'm sorry!"* he said, as he held his hands over his eyes. *"I didn't mean to make you angry; I just didn't want you to freak out on me! Please don't hurt me, Jill!"*

Jill glared at Tails Doll for awhile, but ignored him as she rose to her feet. "...Johnny..." she spoke, trudging along through the castle. "...where are you...?"

"...I'm waiting for you at the top..." Johnny chuckled. *"Don't disappoint me by dying before I can kill you... it wouldn't be fun, otherwise."*

"...Jill?" Tails Doll uttered, looking cautiously at the ewe.

Tails Doll again was ignored, as Jill wandered up the stairs of the foyer; almost as if she had become a zombie. "...Johnny..." she muttered to herself, disappearing through the door at the top of the stairs.

"...Jill..." Tails Doll uttered, as he watched her leave. *...he's at the top.* he thought.

...good job, Tails Doll. Return to Metropolis.

Nodding, Tails Doll fluttered out of the castle.

Outside, the others simply stared at the castle. "We gotta get to that castle!" Brick said. "Brownie's in there all alone; who knows if Johnny won't pull a dirty trick up from out of his sleeve!"

"Agreed..." King muttered, as he glanced up at where Metal stood... only now, he had vanished. "...hey! Metal's gone!"

"Really?" Queen uttered, looking up there as well. "Where could he have gone...?"

"...we're moving." Lock eventually uttered, as he looked at the castle. And sure enough, the city was slowly moving towards the structure, with the robots standing at the edge of the city, ready to repel any attack from the castle.

"I wonder how he plans to land this thing correctly," Boomer mused, rearming her own gun.

"All I'm concerned about is just getting in there," Cal remarked.

"And then, we'll kick that lion's ass." King snarled, cracking his neck.

"Guys!" At that point, Tails Doll reached the group. *"Everyone's alright?"*

"Tails Doll?" Newt hummed. "Hey, did ya see where Metal Sonic went?"

"...he's..." Tails Doll uttered, as he looked away from the group.

Back inside, Jill was making her way up through the castle. Every time she encountered some dark creature in the halls, she wiped the floor with it with a cold decisiveness, and the creature would only shriek in it's last breath. Nothing was going to stop her from reaching Johnny; that much was certain. It had been like this throughout the duration of the time she took to climb all those stairs, eventually reaching the pinnacle of the tower. By then, she just looked at the door, knowing that this could possibly be the door that Johnny was behind.

Somehow...a small desperation arose in her, and her blood red eyes continued to look at that door longer until she finally got the nerve to turn the knob and open it.

When she opened it, she was met with a howling gust of wind; there was a sizeable hole in the tower which led to the flaming roof, where she could see a dark figure sitting amongst the flames, looking down at the

approaching city.

"...Johnny..." she murmured, entering through the door without

bothering to close it behind herself; approaching that dark figure.

"...so, you finally show up." Johnny muttered, without even glancing at Jill, as he kept looking at the city.

Jill didn't respond. After awhile, she stopped before she got too close to Johnny, and her blood red eyes bounced back and forth between him, and Metropolis. Then her gaze just locked onto Johnny.

"...so? Do you have anything to say?" Johnny mused, still not looking at her. *"Or would you prefer that we get on with it?"*

Jill closed her eyes, still remaining silent.

"...she has nothing to say..." she uttered under her breath finally.

"...hm?" Blinking, Johnny finally looked towards Jill. *"...Callous?"* he uttered.

Jill opened her eyes, showing Johnny those blood red eyes. Then a small half-smirk grew on her face, which was enough to confirm it.

Seeing that smirk, Johnny smirked as well. *"...looks like she couldn't pin you down, after all."* he chuckled, standing up from where he sat. *"Now, Callous... how about we destroy Jill's friends, before they grow too annoying?"*

Jill looked upon the city again. "...let's wait for them," she said. "We can make like you were beating me, and when they come to help, we take them down."

"That sounds lovely..." Johnny chuckled, as he opened his palm, where a swirl of Corruption appeared. *"You see, Callous... I've learned myself a new trick while I waited for you. I'm sure you'll be surprised when you see it."*

"I don't think she'll have time to see it, Johnny."

Blinking, Johnny quickly looked behind him, just as he noticed a beam of Purity headed at him. Snarling, he smacked it away with his left hand, glaring at his attacker. *"...you..."*

"Pardon my intrusion..." Metal Sonic chuckled, as the metallix walked towards the two, clenching his robotic hands into fists. *"...but I'm here to kill you, Johnny."*

It was a bit of a surprise to Jill how Metal was a metallix again, but she didn't express it in any way. She only looked at him with those red eyes.

Metal simply cast a glance at Jill, before looking back at Johnny. *"Now... bring it on."*

"...bastard..." Johnny growled, as he placed a hand on the roof. *"...don't think that blocking me is going to be easy."* At that point, the black flames amassed in a circle around the three, blocking all of them from leaving.

"...so you're not running away..." Metal hummed, as his two arms turned into blades, which were coated with Purity. *"...this ought to be interesting."*

Jill turned her head to Johnny a moment then...and allowed Unity to emit off around her, when she looked back at Metal. "Can you stand fighting the two of us...Toaster?" she said coldly.

"...I don't know..." Metal hummed. *"...but the real question is-"*

"-can you stand-" At that point, the two heard a voice behind them, and looking back, they saw another Metal Sonic, whose blades also shone with Purity.

"-fighting against-" Then, several more Metal Sonics appeared behind the one they were looking at, each of them having blades shining with Purity, Corruption and Unity.

"-an army?" Soon, both Johnny and Jill were surrounded by what could only be hundreds of Metal Sonics, each of them either prepared with Unity, Corruption or Purity.

"...tsch... is this a joke? Of course we can fight this!" Johnny scoffed. *"All we need to do is find the real one, and the rest stop functioning!"*

Scoffing, Metal glanced back at Jill. *"...she's still there, isn't she...*

Callous?" he presumed.

"She is," Jill answered, opening her hands to bring out the holy blade, and the forsaken scythe; both of which took on some of the Unity surrounding Jill. "But she won't be able to gain control anytime soon."

"...then I'll need to make sure that you're kept alive." Metal scoffed. *"Johnny, however, is expendable."*

Gritting his teeth, Johnny glanced at Jill. *"...hey, Callous... after we destroy this toaster, how about I pull Jill's spirit out of your body before we deal with the others? Then she'll never be able to gain control."*

"Let's do that..." Jill chuckled darkly; which was pretty disturbing to see. "She can remain in limbo helplessly then, and simply watching us could be enough torture." She picked out a group of Metal's and performed some type of helicopter slash at them with the sword and scythe.

Surprisingly, however, each and every one of them easily parried the incoming slashes, keeping Jill at bay. *"...did you really think I'd let my copies be simple drones?"* Metal chuckled. *"Oh, no... each of them are sentient, with a mindset equal to my own."*

"So what?" Johnny scoffed. *"It's not gonna let you win!"*

"...Jill may be able to control Unity..." Metal mused, before chuckling. *"...but I created that force. I'd say we're evenly matched... except in terms of numbers."* Then, all of the Metals lunged at both Johnny and Jill, furiously attacking them with no let-up.

Striking away a few of them, Johnny shot a quick glance at the city, which was advancing towards the castle still. *...soon, Callous... it'll all be over for them.* he thought, before punching one Metal in the face.

Back outside in Metropolis... "EEH?" Punk yelled in surprise. "Metal's gone off to take care of Johnny on his own?"

"That's what I told you!" Tails Doll nodded. *"He... he told me to follow*

Jill, and find out where Johnny was hiding! But with Jill having those red eyes again..."

"...kkh..." Lin uttered, as she looked at the castle with some worry. "...man, can't we go faster?"

"Tails Doll...what happened when Brownie had those red eyes again?" Brick asked in fear.

"...um..." Tails Doll uttered, as he tapped his hands against each other. *"...she kinda asked us to... attack her, like we wanted to kill her."*

"She could've said it under Callous' influence..." Lin muttered, as she scratched the back of her head. "...a-and... I kind of obliged. Sorry..."

Brick was very concerned then. "There's got to be a way for this castle to fly faster!" he blurted, stomping his feet on the ground. He hated being helpless when he knew that Jill could be in deep trouble.

At that point, all of a sudden, the robots approached the group, glaring at them. "...now what?" Jack uttered.

"...you want to help out Jill?" one of the Shadow Androids inquired, as he folded his arms.

"...we do." Shadow nodded, as he looked right at the android.

"...then all of you should brace yourselves." Before anyone could protest, all of the robots grabbed hold of everyone in the group as best they could, before flying towards the castle at a much quicker pace.

"Ahoy! What`s goin' on?" Whisker yelped, as he glanced around him.

"...we are getting unlikely support." Omega uttered, as he simply looked ahead of them.

"...I get it! They're all taking us to the roof!" Tails Doll chimed in.

"Nice thinking, Big Bro!"

"...this is just too weird for me," Boomer admitted, looking cautiously at the robot that was carrying her.

"Hang on Brownie, we're coming," Brick murmured to himself, looking straight at the castle.

At the roof, the battle between Metal, Jill and Johnny had escalated to what could basically be summed up as a war. With the Metallix's seemingly never-ending copies, neither Johnny nor Jill had gotten any opportunity to deliver a critical blow to the mechanical forces.

"Tsch..." Scoffing, Johnny punched away another Metal copy, when he noticed the incoming group. *"...they're all impatient to get here, aren't they? The fools..."* Sighing, Johnny walked towards the edge, casually avoiding any Metals attacking him, before glancing back at Jill. *"Callous, you can take care of Metal Sonic, right? I have pests to deal with, here."*

"Yeah, I can handle it," Jill said as she blocked some of the attacking Metals. "Better go quickly now."

"Oh, it'll be over in a flash." Johnny chuckled, as he aimed his hand down at the group, an evil grin creeping up across his face.

"So, this was what you planned all along, Callous?" Metal grunted, several versions of him pushing against Jill's blades. *"I thought you and Jill finally came to an understanding, if you allowed your souls to be united."*

"You know, believe it or not, it was a little of both," Jill answered, pushing them back in a power struggle. "I was too exhausted to fight her anymore, so in the beginning I gave in, but when I figured out how to take over her, I saw some potential..."

"Tsch... I should have known you wouldn't give up that easily." Metal scoffed. *"But this time, you have no bargaining chip; once Johnny's dead, I'll make sure to find a way to pull you out of Jill. That's gonna put an end to Novagod's legacy."*

"You're pretty cocky, aren't you, Metal?" Johnny chuckled; as it

turned out, several Metals were trying to attack him, but the black flames of Corruption by the edge of the roof kept them from reaching him. Johnny, however, remained unaffected by the dark inferno. *"But watch just what happens when you forget one very important thing..."* Then, dark energy swirled around the arm he was aiming at the incoming group. *"...don't send the weaker support group to back up the front-line, when the opposition isn't fully occupied."*

At that point, he shot a tiny flicker of Corruption at the group, but rather than hitting any of them, it stopped in mid-air, flickering harmlessly as the group advanced towards it.

"Whoa!" Cal called out, when he saw the Corruption there. Something was NOT right about it at all...

"What does he think he's doing?" Hunter growled.

"...but it's just hanging there..." Lin uttered, as she tilted her head.

"He's got something planned with that..." Natal muttered, glaring at the flickering Corruption.

At that point, Johnny smirked, as he slowly raised his hand. *"...time for you to meet my pet."* he chuckled, as he snapped his fingers.

In that instant, the Corruption began swirling around rapidly, as a dome expanded around it, catching everyone in the group within it. "Hn?" Punk uttered, as he looked around him. "What now?"

At that point, from where the Corruption was swirling, one could see something take shape; some form of feline creature, which was slowly, but surely, growing in size.

"Aw great..." groaned Boomer sarcastically, rasing her gun up.

Slowly, the feline creature began growing more demonic in appearance, as an aura of Corruption surrounded it. Letting out a low growl, the creature placed one paw on the air, before slowly walking towards the group, walking on the very air itself.

"...kkh..." Newt uttered. "...not good..."

The creature continued to mutate, as its relatively small teeth became long and jagged in a matter of seconds, the dark aura actually forming some form of mane around it. Breathing out a fume of what appeared to be poisonous air, the lion-like beast snarled at the sight of its opponents, which it towered immensely over at this point.

"That's a BIG kitty cat!" Ani shouted. Her and Hunter then quickly directed the poisonous air away from the group with telekinesis in efforts to keep them safe.

Jill managed to finally break away from the Metals long enough to see this creature, and she smirked. "Not bad Johnny," she said. "Not bad at all." Then she built a bubble of Unity around her, which exploded in a force meant to wipe away the Metals.

Save for some of them, which shielded themselves with Unity, nearly all of the Metals were wiped cleanly off the roof, some of them being burnt by the black flames, and some simply plummeting into the abyss.

"...is that the best you got?" Metal chuckled, as the remaining Metals bum-rushed Jill, quickly overpowering her and pinning her to the ground.

Meanwhile, the massive lion, undaunted by his attack failing, slammed his claw down on the air, which sent a shock-wave rocketing right at the group.

"Look out!" Quickly, Sage created a psychic barrier to ward off the shock-wave, keeping it at bay.

Jill growled, and tried to kick and squirm to break free from the Metals that held her down. Still, the Metals were too strong and too plentiful, making sure that their entire bodies were coated with Unity, so Jill wouldn't pull anything on them regarding that energy.

Boomer aimed her gun for the beast's head, shooting with the best possible aim she could and she wasn't alone. Lock, Newt, Jack, King, Sage, Miser, Omega, Whisker, and even Tails and Tails Doll took whatever weapons they had ready, and fired full salvos upon

the massive monster. While the beast didn't seem to get hurt, roars of pain at least got the group thinking that they were doing something to it.

All of a sudden, Jill stopped squirming, and her head fell back in exhaustion. When she opened her eyes, Metal saw that they were green again, and she looked at him in desperation. "Metal," she uttered. Then they flashed red again, and Jill tried even harder to squirm out of the Metals grip. "Damn, she was stronger than I thought..." she murmured to herself.

"You can't stay in control forever, Callous." Metal said, pushing her further down. *"She'll pull through, and you'll perish... like you should have done earlier this day."*

"You know what, Toaster?" Jill growled. "F*%& you!" And she sunk beneath the surface the Metals pressed her against, vanishing.

"...my, such language." Metal mused snidely, as the copies looked at each other. *"She's bound to try a sneak attack on us. Take to the air."* Nodding, each of the copies flew upwards, away from the castle...

...except for one, who looked towards Johnny, the lion still being preoccupied with controlling his beast. *...he's mine!* he thought, as he dashed towards Johnny...

While that Metal ran for Johnny, it gave a certain someone an opportunity to pop right back up in his way, just in time for that Metal to accidentally run into a holy blade head on; stabbing Metal. "Don't you even think about it," she said coldly, digging the blade deeper into Metal.

For a moment, the Metal looked startled, as he slouched over, the light in his eyes ebbing out. *"...y-you..."* he uttered, weakly glancing up at Jill.

"...are far too gullible."

Before Callous could react, Metal's body began glowing with Unity. His entire body turned into liquid metal, which wrapped itself around

Jill, constricting her. *"That was a fake."* Then, a tendril shot from one of the other Metals, hitting the liquid metal keeping Jill at bay, before lifting it away from the castle.

"Wha?" Jill did not expect that at all, and she couldn't even move this time while she tried to struggle out of the liquid metal holding her. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Keeping you out of harm's way." Metal replied. *"That is to say, we're keeping you from running rampant while you're occupying Jill's body. Until she manages to permanently reclaim control, you're not going anywhere, Callous."*

"And you tell me that I play cheap!" Jill barked, not realizing the incredible irony in that. "Well she won't gain control anytime soon and Johnny's going to take out all of her stupid friends! You're out of luck Metal!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that..." Metal chuckled, and this time, all of the Metal's began laughing along with him.

Jill glared at them. "...what the hell is so funny?" she asked.

"Oh, just the fact that you've missed a crucial detail, Callous," Metal chuckled as he glanced toward Metropolis. " *You see, the only one who can move Metropolis is me, so if I'm here...then who's piloting the city?"*

Jill's eyes widened when she saw the point of what Metal was getting at, and she glared up at them again. "So the real you is in there, flesh and blood," he grumbled. Then an idea came to her head. "...but if you're concentrating all your power piloting the city and those robots...then there's no way you could stop someone from attacking you directly."

"That would be true," Metal chuckled, *"if I had played all the cards in my hand. But I still have one more trick for you to see."*

"Fine then. Entertain me with your...'trick,'" Jill growled.

Even as the group fired everything they had at the monster, it didn't show any signs of falling, though at the very least it looked

weakened. "Tsch, how are we gonna bring that thing down?" King growled, as he sent another arc of electricity at the beast.

"No matter how much we shoot, it's not making any real progress," Cal said. "We need a much bigger and stronger weapon."

"But where are we going to get something like that?" Natal asked, as she looked up at the beast who still hadn't attacked them.

"...Maybe..." Tails Doll murmured, looking behind him toward Metropolis, seeing that the city almost caught up with them.

Charmy caught the plushie looking back at the city. "Tails Doll, is there something like that back in Metropolis?"

"...something like that," Tails Doll answered, without glancing at Charmy.

"Guys, I think it's charging up something!" Lin warned. The monster was inhaling exessively dark energy swirling ferouciously around it's mouth.

"Uh oh!" Striker yelped, with Buddy shaking behind his shoulder.

"Kkh...I don't think I'll be able to hold off that kind of attack," Sage uttered, just as she noticed Miser fly forward. "Miser?"

"I'll take the blow," Miser said, glaring up at the beast. "At the very least, it won't get you!"

At that point, Tails Doll gasped. *"Everyone, DUCK!"*

"Duck? Why?" Brick questioned.

"Just do it stupid!" Boomer barked.

As everyone ducked, the beast looked down at them and opened its mouth to fire the energy it had stored within-

-only a massive, pale-green energy shot right through the monster, piercing it and the dark dome. Howling painfully, the beam slowly desintegrated the monster while the dome faded away.

"Aw, HECK yeah!" Brick proclaimed.

Jill, meanwhile, gawked in fear. "...no," she gasped.

"Do you know what that was?" Metal chuckled, watching the beam hit the castle. *"That is the weapon that Eggman wanted me to use to conquer the world; an energy conversion cannon. It was designed to utilize Chaos Energy in its rawest form, increasing its power beyond even that of a Super-powered being, but I did a few modifications and now any form of energy can be used to power it; including Purity."* While the beam didn't damage the castle, one could clearly see the darkness wash away from when the beam was blasting against it, as if the entire building was being purified.

Seeing this, Johnny could only stare with a gaping mouth. *...how in the...* he thought.

Jill watched all that occurred while she tried to suppress the fears deep inside her. She could care less what happened to that stupid castle, but she feared for Johnny. These forces were gaining strength against him, and she was forced to watch without a means to help him. At this rate, Johnny would be beaten, and her, disposed of.

She wasn't going to hide it anymore. She loved Johnny, and she wasn't going to let a bastard like Metal Sonic kill him. That was more than enough motivation for her Unity to react as it coursed through her in dangerous, powerful levels, which eventually emitted off of her. Seeing that, Metal growled, " *Oh no you don't!"* All the Metals sent a tendril into the liquid metal holding Jill, transferring their own Unity to keep hers suppressed.

However, that was when Johnny noticed Metal keeping Jill up in the sky. *"...Callous..."* he snarled, dark energy building up in his mouth. *"...GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER!"* Roaring, Johnny fired a beam out at three of the Metals, instantly vaporizing them.

Metal could only look at the copies being destroyed with surprise. ...Uh oh...he thought, looking at Johnny who gathered more dark energy within his mouth.

With less Metals to hold her down and her fury building just as dangerously as her power, Jill let out a screech, "LET ME GO!" and a force of Unity imploded out from her in hopes to break through the liquid metal and free her. Before the Metals could even hope to try and recapture her, another dark beam shot out from Johnny's mouth, taking out even more Metals.

"...tch, this isn't going as planned," Metal uttered, as he watched more of his copies being obliterated. *"...guess I got no choice. Sorry Jill, but I'll have to-"* a dark fist suddenly shot right through the metallix, silencing him.

"...Callous..." Johnny uttered, as she simply glared at the machine which slowly slouched over. "...change of plans. We're pulling that bitch out of your body, NOW!"

Brick heard that and no doubt reacted to it. "No! YOU'RE NOT GONNA DO ANYTHING TO BROWNIE!" he screamed, getting the robot that was carrying him to fly after the two. "BROWNIE!" he cried desperately to reach her.

Jill's eyes widened, turning green momentarily. "...Brick?" she muttered. Then she snarled, reopening her red eyes. "Do it now, Johnny, before she gets control again!"

"...of course," Johnny growled, as he pulled his fist out of Metal's stomach and allowed it to flare with Corruption. *"Time for you to disappear, Jill!"* he roared while glaring at her, reeling his fist back-

-when someone grabbed his hand. "You don't touch her!"

Johnny only barely saw who it was when he was furiously hurled down, slamming against the roof. He saw Shadow who kept himself suspended in the air, via the robot carrying him. *"...damn android..."* Johnny growled.

Shadow didn't bother looking at Johnny; only at Jill. *"...leave,"* he uttered in that same dark tongue, folding his arms.

"...I'm not letting her go!" Jill snapped in a hostile tone in the same language. Then she spoke normally, "Why couldn't you have just

stayed in hell where you belong?"

"Well now, Callous, that's not very nice," spoke a voice that she didn't ever want to hear.

Jill looked around quickly. "...no, it can't be-" and she was cut off when a blue blur snatched her and shot her onto the roof.

Blinking, Shadow looked towards where this blue blur had shot her off to. "...how on..." and he warped down to the roof as well.

Ani motioned towards the roof, "C'mon!" and everyone followed her to the roof where Jill got onto her feet and looked around, until her eyes fell on someone.

"...you!" she hissed.

"Who, me?" snickered that someone, whom everyong recognized instantly to their surprise.

"Oh my god...it's him!" Gale uttered with a point.

For standing there was the one and only Sonic the Hedgehog.

"...S-Sonic?" Tails uttered in sheer disbelief.

"WHAT THE HELL?" Punk yelled in sync with Whisker and Newt; all three of them shocked to see the legend standing before them.

"...what do you know..." Lock hummed.

"...Sonic..." Tails Doll fluttered towards the hedgehog. *"...is that really you?"*

"...Alright, I know there isn't any Sonic Androids for you to be housing," Shadow mused. "So is this just your spirit, or something else?"

Back in Metropolis within the largest tower there, even a certain being saw this with a surprised look. *...Sonic...* he thought.

While everyone was silenced in their shock at seeing him, Jill

clenched her teeth. Sonic chuckled, "I guess you're not too happy to see me, are ya?"

"...how did you get here?" Jill demanded.

"I just flew in," Sonic said with a shrug. "What? You thought that us ghosts couldn't come here? It's not Angel Island, you know."

"You made a mistake in coming here..." Johnny said as he cracked his neck. *"Now I'll take you and add you to my power!"* he roared, as he suddenly dashed right at Sonic.

"Hold it!" Before Johnny could reach Sonic, Shadow stood in his way and grabbed him, keeping him at bay. "Whatever you've planned Sonic, do it quickly! I won't be able to hold him forever!" He grunted, as Johnny struggled.

"You keep away from me, Sonic!" Jill yelled, bringing out her sword and scythe. "There's NO WAY I'm giving her back her body!" and she tried to take swipe at Sonic, but he merely stepped around her like nothing.

"Someone is just in a fowl mood because they need a time out," Sonic taunted, charging up a Spin Dash powerful enough that when he hit her, he knocked her off the roof and falling through the air. And somehow, the very pain she was in was enough to stun her, and she fell helplessly.

"CALLOUS!" Johnny roared, as he swung Shadow away running towards the edge. *"DAMN YOU, SONIC!"* Before he reached the edge, however, Shadow warped in front of him and aimed a kick to the face, sending Johnny crashing into the wall of another castle tower.

As for Jill, several of Metal's robots flew underneath her to slow her fall and ensure her landing to be upon the city of Metropolis. Once she finally did land, Sonic flew by and whisked her up, carrying her to the barrel of the large massive cannon that had shot the castle and Johnny's "pet" earlier.

"...what's he doing?" Silver uttered.

Sonic then held Jill in front of the cannon. "Okay Metal, shoot!" he called out.

Blinking, Metal looked at the two from within the building. *...is he serious?* he thought, holding his head. That was when the tower Johnny crashed into began to crumble underneath a massive pillar of Corruption, along with a deafening roar. Metal grit his teeth uneasily when he saw that. *...guess there's no choice, but if this ends up killing her, I'll kill you Sonic!* And so, a beam of Purity shot out from the cannon, instantly engulfing both Sonic and Jill. Sonic could hand the pain, and he held Jill there as she shrieked horribly with such an unimaginable cry of pain.

It certainly affected Brick. "...B-Brownie," he uttered shakily. Seeing Brick like that, Tails Doll fluttered towards him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I hope whatever he's got planed works," Shadow muttered as he glanced toward the dark pillar which was slowly eating away the tower it erupted from. "...otherwise, we're in a lot of trouble."

The cannon finally ceased, showing Sonic with faint weariness, and Jill who was pretty injured from the blast. Sonic continued to hold her, and it took her awhile to finally open her eyes and look at him.

"...Sonic?" she mumbled, with her green eyes wide with wonder.

Sonic grinned. "Hiya Jill, how are you feeling?"

"...it worked..." Metal murmured, wiping his brow. "...for a moment, I was getting worried..."

Jill noticed the pillar of Corruption building up in that particular tower. "...that doesn't look good," she muttered.

"Yeah, Johnny's not a happy camper," Sonic said. looking that way as well.

"Can you fly me to that roof?" Jill asked, pointing to the roof that all the others were standing on.

"No prob," Sonic agreed, flying over there.

Once she landed, the last parts of the tower were consumed by Corruption, as the pillar loomed above the group looking at it. "...is he going to come out of there?" Lock hummed.

"Kekekeke...he's in there..." Ripper uttered.

"I could walk in there and see what happened to him," Miser proposed, as she took a few steps toward the pillar.

Jill looked worriedly at the rhino. "...Miser, be careful," she urged.

"...don't worry about me," Miser said, looking back at Jill with a smile. "I'm immortal, remember?" Then she walked towards the pillar of Corruption, gently placing a hand against it. Whilst a feeling of pain washed over her, she remained undaunted as she slowly pushed her hand through the darkness.

"...dang, she IS tough," Gale remarked, seeing Miser do this.

"You have no idea," King said with a proud smile, folding his arms. Soon, Miser had gotten her entire arm within the pillar, before pushing through the rest of her body. They definitely saw that she was in pain. but that didn't stop her for a single second, as she finally got herself fully into the pillar.

"...kekekeke... be safe..." Ripper bit worriedly.

Chapter 84

This chapter is a LONG one, so brace yourselves!

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-FOUR

Miser found herself walking on an invisible floor in a void of pure darkness. Right now, the only thing she heard were wandering, eerie whispers, speaking without any sense of clarity whatsoever. Then the farther she walked, she started seeing things. A strange wind came from nowhere, blowing past her as it carried more of those whispers along with it. Then Miser heard devious cackles of laughter that also echoed on to nothing. Looking around her, Miser frowned. Had it been any other person, they'd likely perish simply from standing within this area, but here she remained, walking onwards through the darkness. "...is there anyone here?" she said.

The only answer she got was more jumbled up whispers...

"...is there really no one here?" Miser uttered, glancing around her. "...no, there must be someone here... Johnny. He has to be here... but who else is here?"

"...Miser..." she heard a male voice utter.

Hearing that voice, she spun around, only to be met with more darkness. "...this is too disorienting..." she muttered.

All of the whispering voices began to speak her name, chanting her name in an unorganized chatter. "Miser...Miser...Miser..."

Looking around her, Miser frowned, as she reached for her railgun, which was hanging on her back. *...Johnny, if you don't show yourself...*

At that point, something suddenly smacked her right across the face,

causing her to stagger backwards. *...what in the...*

"...hello... Miser..." that male voice uttered, as a dark chuckle began filling the void around the rhino. The whispers all around joined chuckling, almost mocking Miser.

Gritting her teeth, Miser quickly aimed her railgun at the darkness, looking all around her. "...come out, Johnny! Stop playing around!"

"...I think not..." Johnny chuckled. *"...this area... nurtures me... it makes me grow stronger..."* Then, the rhino felt some force strike her from behind, sending her staggering forward. *"...and you... are the perfect punching bag..."*

Shaking her head, Miser aimed her railgun at where she thought she heard Johnny's voice, before firing a salvo. *...how am I supposed to hit him like this...?* she thought.

After the whispers snickered, it seemed like Miser was hit once more, and again, and again, and suddenly it ceased.

Shaking her head, Miser looked around her with a frown on her face. "...you're not the only one hitting me, Johnny..." she spat. "...who else is with you?"

"Why don't we ask them?" Johnny chuckled, before a furious blow to her skull led to Miser being slammed against the ground. *"Who is with me?"*

"Why, we are the souls he has absorbed..." chuckled one whisper.

"...the ones that delight in the things he does at least..." another whisper hissed.

"...souls like... Johnny...?" Miser uttered, as she pushed herself to her feet. "...how can anyone... enjoy what he does?"

"...if you hadn't hung out with King, Miser..." Johnny chuckled. *"...maybe you'd see the joy of killing others..."*

"...how can I see that kind of joy..." Miser muttered, as she closed her eyes. "...when I cannot be killed?"

"What strength, standing up to Johnny..." spoke a voice that Miser dreaded, and hoped that she'd never hear. "I guess that's why I liked you the most...heheheh..." Miser whirled around, and behind her stood the icon of her childhood nightmares.

Prowler.

Her eyes widened, and she nearly dropped the railgun in surprise at seeing that hyena before her. "...P-Prowler...?"

"...I suppose I didn't tell you..." Johnny chuckled. *"...me and Callous did a raid on that area... and stole every soul from there... Prowler included..."*

"...why..." Gritting her teeth, Miser quickly aimed her railgun at Prowler, though one could tell from just looking at her that she was frightened beyond compare. "D-don't come any closer!"

"Aw, what's the matter?" chuckled Prowler with a very wicked grin. "I thought you'd be happy to see me..." and against her wishes, he started walking toward her without a hint of intimidation.

"...I'd only be happy to see you if I were insane!" Miser said, as she began stepping away from Prowler, though she didn't aim her railgun away from the hyena. "Now stop, or I'll shoot you!"

"That's the thing, isn't it Miser?" Prowler only continued to walk toward her, ignoring her warning. "You might never die, and you might be able to take the pain...but you can't withstand the torture your mentality goes through forever...who's to say that you aren't already insane?"

"...I'm not insane..." Miser uttered, as she glared angrily at the hyena. "...my friends... they've kept me company for so long... they've kept me from falling into the pit of insanity and loneliness..."

"For now," Prowler retorted. "But what'll happen when they pass away and little ol' you is still here, huh?"

"...what...?" Miser uttered, as she actually stopped moving, looking at Prowler with a dumbstruck look.

"It'll happen," Prowler said. "Their times will come, whether it's today, tomorrow, next week...in a few years...but one by one they'll go, and you'll remain..." and he came even closer, chuckling. "All the friends you will ever make will all die, while you live out to the very last days of humanity itself..."

"...n-no..." Miser uttered, as she closed her eyes. "...that's not... surely I can die of old age...?"

"Ah...but what if you can't even die of old age?" Prowler continued, finally close enough to cup her chin in his hand. "What if...you live even longer than humanity itself, rather than just to its last days?"

"...no..." Miser uttered, desperately holding back her tears. "...that... that can't be..."

"Would you be able to live with yourself, for that long?" Prowler whispered, much closer now. Then just to scare her, he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

It truly frightened her, as she quickly pushed Prowler away, before quickly aiming the railgun at him again. "...bastard..." she uttered.

"I am, aren't I?" Prowler said with an amused smile. Then the whispers chattered again, and chuckled along with him.

Gritting her teeth, Miser moved a finger towards the trigger. "...I could blast you into oblivion right now..." she uttered. "...why aren't you afraid... like when Ripper killed you?"

"Because, little Miser," Prowler said, just as dark hands suddenly grabbed her, and snared the railgun out of her hold. "I'm already dead. There's nothing else you can do to me...but there's so much I can do to you..."

"No!" Miser uttered, as she grabbed hold of some of the arms, trying to tear them away from her. "Leave me!" Then, she glared at Prowler. "...the only ones from that time who approved of your sick ways were your two companions... what spirits would actually be thinking like you?"

"You'd be surprised," Prowler said, coming up to Miser again and

grabbing her, while more dark hands snatched her.

"Kkh..." Gritting her teeth, Miser tried fighting off all those dark hands around her. "Leave me be..."

At that point, she could hear Johnny's chuckles. *"...normally, I'd have tried to intervene... but I think Prowler could actually serve a purpose... this way, you won't be able to take any attack aimed at her..."* Then, the lion began laughing. *"..don't break her too badly, now..."*

"I'll be more concerned about the fun I'll have," Prowler chuckled, reaching over and kissing Miser's neck.

Shuddering, Miser instantly slammed her head against Prowler's, in order to knock him away from her. "...let go of me... you sick creep!"

"Why should I?" Prowler questioned. "Ripper isn't here to save you this time...and heroic old Desperado is long gone. No one will be left to protect you..."

"I wouldn't say that."

Prowler didn't have time to respond as an invisible force blasted him away from Miser, and the dark hands scurried away, freeing her.

Blinking, Miser looked around her. "...who... was that...?"

"Like, don't be afraid, Miser! We got your back!"

"...painful, though it is to stay within this area..."

Hearing those voices, Miser was dumbstruck. "...is that really...?"

Prowler scrambled back onto his own feet, and he was just as dumbfounded as Miser; but unlike her, he tried to hide it. "What's the matter Prowler, aren't you happy to see us?" a voice mocked, and when Prowler turned quickly, he saw someone walk out of the darkness into view. Seeing who it was made the hyena shake all over.

Desperado looked at him with an unforgiving look. "I thought I

warned you to keep your grubby little hands to yourself."

"...Desperado..." Miser uttered, just as she felt someone poke her on the shoulder. When she turned around, someone shoved her railgun into her arms.

"Like, I think you'll need this more than me." Bliss said with a small smile, placing a hand on the rhino's shoulder.

"...Bliss..." Miser said, as a wave of relief flooded over her.

Prowler wasn't worried about Bliss, but he backed away from Desperado, whimpering, while Desperado approached him. "Look at you now," Desperado said. "What happened to your high and mighty attitude, Prowler? I thought you weren't afraid of anyone since you were already dead..."

"Death doesn't change anyone, Desperado..." a third voice uttered, as a fog began covering the darkness, ironically, lighting the area up somewhat.

"Like, you're one to talk!" Bliss scoffed, folding her arms.

"...death doesn't change anyone... unless they're willing to change." Sprinter muttered, as he appeared behind Prowler, simply looking at him.

"...Sprinter..." Miser uttered, as she could only look at the three. "...you're all..."

"We're all here for you Miser," Desperado said. "And you've made us proud...all of you have; King, Queen, Ripper, Wiper, all of 'em."

"...w-w-what are you going to do?" Prowler asked, drawing Desperado's gaze toward him.

"...we're going to make Ripper killing you seem like a slap on the wrist." Sprinter uttered ominously, as fog gathered around his body.

"Listen, Miser, Johnny, like, went towards the outside." Bliss said, taking the rhino by her arm. "I'll show you, like, the way out."

"...everyone..." Miser uttered, as she drew a small smile. "...thank you..." Then, Bliss pulled Miser after her, away from Prowler, Desperado and Sprinter.

"Wait, wah-AGGGGGH!" Prowler screamed painfully...

And Desperado smacked his forehead. "...He hasn't even tried to hurt you yet, you big baby."

"...this is pathetic..." Sprinter muttered, as he rubbed his temples. "...even in death, he has no dignity."

Outside, everyone watched patiently, but the worry increased. Was Miser ever going to come out of there? Jill wondered if she would have to go in there herself, but no one moved in case Miser would somehow come out of there on her own.

Eventually, the group saw ripples appearing on the pillar's surface, as if someone was attempting to exit the structure.

"...Miser?" Ripper uttered.

They all watched in hopes that Ripper was right...

Soon, they could see an arm shoot out of the pillar... a black hand. "...n-no..." Jack uttered, knowing just who that arm belonged to.

"You catch on quick..." a dark voice chuckled, as soon, Johnny did indeed step out from the pillar, but now, his entire body had changed appearance.

Rather than simply looking like he used to with a pair of wings, Johnny's entire body had become malformed, as his feet, knees, elbows and fingers looked like they had black blades jutting out of them, and his face had contorted into a wicked, jagged grin, which didn't fade one bit. The wings, too, had been transformed, looking more like wings of a dragon, and even his mane-like hair was different; set ablaze with fires of Corruption.

"...what the hell...?" Lock uttered, as he could only gape at the abomination Johnny had become.

"...now..." Johnny chuckled, as he licked his lips with a forked, pitch-black tongue, glaring at the group with an insane look in his eyes . *"...ready to die?"*

"Man…you are BUTT UGLY," Sonic remarked, not affected by this one bit. "Glad it doesn't run in the family, huh Jack?"

Jill shot a look at Sonic. "…what's that supposed to mean?"

Jack glanced at Jill for a brief moment, before looking down at the ground. "...Johnny's... my uncle." Jack managed to utter.

"...EEEEEH?" King yelped, as he looked at Jack in disbelief. "He's your UNCLE?"

"...two completely different characters... related?" Queen hummed, looking from Jack and Johnny.

"...kekeke..." Ripper growled, as he glared at Johnny. "...where's Miser?"

"Oh, she's still alive..." Johnny chuckled, as he cracked his neck. *"...but she'll soon be wishing that she could die."*

"Bastard..." Ripper uttered, raising his blades. "...I ought to cut you down right now... kekekekeke..."

"Oh, really?" Johnny chuckled, as he folded his arms. *"And what would Slashers think of that?"*

"Slashers are dead!" Ripper snapped, glaring at the demonic lion. "I don't need them anymore! Kekekeke!"

Jill was stricken speechless by that news. Johnny...Jack's uncle? "...how could you be Jack's uncle?" she asked. "Jack came from the Nameless Zone..."

"Oh, so that's where she ran off to?" Johnny chuckled. *"Figures... my sister never did fancy the violent ways of the Leonliels..."*

"...but you were 17 by the time I killed you..." Wiper uttered. "...and since Jack's 17 now... he must've been only two years old when you

died..."

"Well, my sister was nine years older than me. I wouldn't be surprised if she got a kid around that time..." Johnny mused, before laughing. *"...but to think that she actually fled from this zone... that's a riot, alright!"*

Hearing that, Jack gritted his teeth, as he clenched his hands into fists. "...you..."

"It's no wonder she fled," Sonic remarked sarcastically. "And she didn't tell Jack anything because of her family...she didn't say anything about it so she could protect him."

"Look what good that did..." Hunter grumbled.

"Well, you all have Colonel Reeds to thank for that..." Johnny chuckled, before snapping his fingers. *"...but oops! He's dead; thanks to Bloom and Gloom."*

"It doesn't matter, Johnny." Sage uttered, as she glared at the demonic lion. "Bloom, Gloom, Callous, Novagod... they're gone. You're the only one left."

"...heh..." Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at Jill. *"...Callous ain't gone. I can bring her back..."*

"Sorry Johnny...I'm not letting that happen," Jill said. "...I've been through too much just to let it happen..." She opened her hand again, bring out the sword and scythe, readying herself.

"...you can try and fight it..." Johnny chuckled, as he cracked his knuckles, his wicked grin somehow widening. *"...but I'll just pump your body full of Corruption... that should bring Callous back in control for good, shouldn't it?"*

"Sorry hon, but I'm also not letting you bring that floozy out of her." Someone suddenly swooped in, landing next to Jill. "She gives gals like me a bad name, after all." And it was Rouge the Bat, eying Johnny with a glaze of disapproval at his new form.

"WHA?" Cal blurted, since the surprises just didn't seem to cease at

all.

"...Rouge..." Shadow hummed, as he glanced around him.

At that point, what appeared to be several shuriken suddenly flew right at Johnny, though he was quick enough to avoid them. "...I'd say it's high time that you were stopped." At that point, a purple chameleon appeared right next to Cal, twirling a kunai around his left finger; Espio the Chameleon.

"Yeah! We've had enough of you mooching in on others, when ya should be dead!" a boisterous voice called, as someone suddenly stood next to King; Vector the Crocodile.

"Really, it's got to stop." Then, an armadillo appeared by the kids, as he folded his arms; Mighty the Armadillo.

"...kkh... where the hell do all of you keep popping up from?" Johnny snarled, glancing at the numerous spirits showing up. *"...but this is fortunate... with the amount of Corruption I possess... the moment I get my hands on any of you, you'll become part of my power instantly!"*

"Please. You sound like an annoying egghead we used to know," said a tough voice, and the red echidna known as Knuckles walked into the scene appeared next to Brick and Lock.

"And you're going to be stopped just like him!" another voice chimed, and from behind Sonic, a pink hedgehog popped out with a large hammer; Amy. "We'll fight back! And we aren't a group to mess with!"

"I would have to agree to that myself." That voice came out from the dark pillar of Corruption, and they saw more ripples on the surface again, only this time, someone else came out of that pillar. A turtle stood, shooting Johnny a stern glare.

Hunter was pretty shaken, as well as the rest of his comrades: except Sage of course. "...D-Desperado?" he uttered.

"...no way..." Queen uttered in surprise.

"...Desperado..." Johnny hissed. *"...I thought you were absorbed!"*

"Sorry to dash your hopes..." At that point, a small cloud of mist flowed out from the pillar, slowly reforming into Sprinter. "...but I had a small hand in their escape."

"Sprinter..." Johnny growled. *"...what do you mean 'they'?"*

"He means, like, me too, ya jerk!" At that point, a certain sheep stomped out of the pillar as well, as she glared at Johnny with a pout.

"...Bliss..." Johnny snarled, just as he noticed that the pillar was still rippling. *"...hn?"*

Before he could react, all of a sudden, someone shot out from the pillar, before decking Johnny squarely in the face, sending him tumbling to the ground. "...that's for leaving me with Prowler, you sick son of a bitch." Miser grunted, as she looked down at Johnny with a frown.

"Miser!" Hunter blurted out. "You're alright!"

"Thanks for the observation, Sherlock," Sonic murmured with some slight sarcasm.

"Miser..." Ripper uttered happily at the sight of the rhino.

"...wait, hang on... did you just say Prowler?" King sputtered, looking at Miser in disbelief. "That goddamn pedo was in there?"

"Indeed, he was..." Sprinter nodded, as he brushed dust off his hands. "...but no longer. He's gotten his just desserts, now."

"Now, now everyone, we really must mind our language," Rouge chuckled in muse. "There are children here after all."

"I don't mind. Brick was enough of a potty mouth," Ani remarked, which jolted the bull.

"Hey! I'm not that bad!" he protested.

"I think someone would care to disagree..." Natal remarked, which got some snickers out of Newt.

"Excuse me, but have you all FORGOTTEN ABOUT ME?" Roaring, Johnny instantly got back on his feet, glaring at the group. *"I'll kill... I'll kill you all..."* he snarled, as what appeared to be dark electricity danced around his fingers. *"...AND I'LL BRING CALLOUS BACK!"* With a massive roar, Johnny fired a volley of electricity towards King.

However, before it could hit the tiger, the electricity suddenly shifted course, striking Bliss' wool instead. "...did you forget, Johnny...?" Bliss uttered with a smirk. "Wasn't my wool, like, the optimal lightning rod?"

Seeing that, Johnny's eyes widened. *Shit!* he thought. *I really forgot about that for a moment!*

While everyone chuckled, Jill simply looked at Johnny. "I pity you..." she said, as something started to appear on her back. "You've become so twisted and tainted...and yet you've found someone you'd do anything to save." What appeared on her back were transparent wings. One was white, and shaped like an angel's wing, while the other was black and looked demonic.

"Whoa..." Rudy cooed in awe, while looking at her wings.

Canceling the electric attack, Johnny shot Jill a glare. *"...pity me...?"* he snarled, turning to fully face the ewe, ignoring the wings on her back.

Jill shook her head. "Is it really mine and Metal's fault that you've grown so close to Callous? And I thought you were completely heartless, Johnny..."

What's she doing? Milo wondered, finding it kind of weird the way she spoke.

Growling, Johnny began walking towards Jill. *"...you want me to say it, right?"* he uttered. *"Fine, I'll admit it. I love Callous... and there's no force in this world that's gonna stop me from getting her back."*

"...Corruption is the force that'll stop you Johnny," Jill answered. "Because the farther you plunge yourself into its hold...the more it will damage you, until your mind and body finally crumble away to nothing..." With the sword and scythe still in her hands, she raised her sword at him. "...I'm going to take you down before that happens...for Callous' sake. So she doesn't have to see that happen to you."

"...see what happen to me?" Johnny snapped, as he stomped his foot down on the ground, glaring at Jill. *"Don't any of you get it? I can control this energy with ease! I've surpassed Deity Novagod in anything he could hope to accomplish, without even being dead!"* As he spoke, dark energy swirled around in his mouth. *"And I'll definitely bring Callous back!"* Then, he suddenly shot a massive, dark beam right at Jill.

With everyone around her, Jill held her hand forward, creating a dark green shield that bounced the beam away. After that, she used those wings of hers to flap up into the air. "We're taking this into the air," she said.

"Fine by me!" Johnny snarled, as he flapped his own wings, rocketing up after Jill.

"...good luck, Jill..." Jack uttered, as he, along with the others, looked up at the impending battle between Jill and Johnny.

"...man, this just blows me away," Silver murmured, not only about the battle, but the fact that Sonic and his friends have appeared, when he heard that they were dead.

So the battle began. Jill thrust her sword at Johnny as the first move. To block this, Johnny simply raised his leg, blocking the blade with his knee; the sharp edges really seemed to be like blades.

"Useless!" he roared, as he swung his hand at Jill, intending to cut her with his razor-sharp fingers. Jill jumped back in the air away from them, and tried to get him at the side with the blade of the scythe. However, Johnny simply raised his arm to block this attack, his sharpened elbow repelling the scythe's blade.

"Useless!" he called again, before he quickly shot his knee forward, intending to stab Jill with the sharpened knee.

"AGH!" Jill backed away, clutching a gash in her stomach where Johnny kneed her. Shortly after she wiped away the blood, the wound regenerated and healed, and Jill returned with another attempt to slash Johnny with the sword. However, this attempt was thwarted as Johnny kicked the incoming blade, his sharpened foot blocking the sword this time. Then, at point blank range, Johnny fired a blast of Corruption from his mouth, right at Jill. This blasted Jill back a good distance, and she even fell through the air until she managed to catch herself with the help of her wings. Everyone rushed to the edge of the roof in order to keep watching them, while Jill put energies of Unity around both her weapons and fired slash waves of Unity energy at Johnny. Like a wild beast, Johnny zipped in an unpredictable pattern around the slash waves, as he kept firing blasts of Corruption at the ewe. Jill did her best to avoid these incoming blasts from Johnny, but she wasn't sure how to approach the demon lion. He was much harder to fight than Callous was, probably because Jill had more ability to predict what move Callous was going to make.

She withdrew her weapons and poured Unity into her hands, and then lunged after Johnny with a punch. Surprisingly, however, Johnny allowed the fist to connect with his face, causing him to recoil...

...but not far enough, as he grabbed hold of Jill's wrist just a few moments after the fist connected. *"...gotcha!"* he laughed, before he threw a Corruption-coated fist directly at Jill's gut.

"Agh!" Jill screamed again, since this was a pretty painful blow. For a moment, she was starting to lose focus too, but she shook her head. *I can't let Callous get control again, or we'll never stop him,* she thought, trying to punch Johnny with the other Unity coated fist.

Again, Johnny allowed the fist to connect with him, as he actually let out a yell of pain... however; he soon began laughing hysterically, as he opened his fist, showing off his sharpened fingers. *"You're mine!"* Then, he suddenly jabbed his open hand at Jill, with all intention of stabbing her with the black appendages.

"Brownie!" Brick screamed, seeing Jill getting stabbed like that. He was even about to jump off the edge and some of the others had to hold him back.

Licking his lips, Johnny's maniacal grin seemed to grow to even greater lengths. *"...I won."* he uttered.

Jill's eyes closed and her breath slowed down, while her hand slowly crept up his shoulder. "...Johnny..." she whispered.

"...hn?" Blinking, Johnny tilted his head. *"Now what? Surrendering?"*

The hand on Johnny's shoulder went underneath his chin, and Jill...came forward and kissed him.

Johnny's eyes widened; he hadn't exactly expected Jill to pull that on him. *...wha... is it... Callous...?* he thought.

Most of the kids' eyes widened, and stuck out their tongues in disgust, while this act petrified Brick.

...she... she pulled... through... That thought sent Johnny into a frenzy, as he kissed Jill back forcefully.

Hunter's stomach twisted watching this, and he turned away. *I didn't think there'd be anybody who'd want to kiss that creep...*

A moment passed whilst the two of them kissed passionately, and finally Jill broke away gently, only still a lip's distance apart. Her finger stroked his cheek...and then Johnny suddenly felt a tremendous pain strike his middle, as Jill ran her sword right into him; something that shocked everyone immensely.

Johnny's eyes widened, as he looked down at the blade. *"...C...Callous..."* he uttered, before they narrowed. *"...no... Jill..."* he snarled. *"...you... tricked me..."*

Jill gave him a glare, showing indeed that her eyes had still been green. "What, and you haven't tried doing that?" She said sarcastically. "...that's for trying to use Metal against me." What Jill didn't notice was that her sword momentarily glowed and blinked, and then faded away again before she could catch it.

Coughing, Johnny quickly got some space between him and Jill, as he glared at her with an enraged look in his eyes. *"...damn you..."* he snarled, dark arcs of electricity crackling around his entire body. *"...damn you... DAMN YOU..."*

"...he's snapped..." Ripper uttered, as he glared at Johnny.

"...I won't forgive..." Johnny uttered, as he clenched his hands into fists, before glaring up at the sky. *"I WON'T FORGIVE YOU!"* As he let out that roar of pure and utter hatred, the Corruption coating the entire castle was suddenly absorbed right into his body, including the massive pillar he had created.

"...he's getting even stronger..." Shadow uttered with a scoff. "...but he's lost his mind."

"It happened, like Jill said..." Milo said, trembling as he hid behind Shadow.

Jill watched this happen to Johnny, and gripped the hilt of her sword courageously. *Mom...* she thought. *...hang on...*

As he finished absorbing the Corruption, Johnny suddenly flared with a powerful aura of Corruption, as he glared at Jill once more . *"...I'll rip you out of her body!"* he roared, before rocketing at Jill, swiping his claws at her repeatedly, without a single moment's respite.

Jill raised her sword and began blocking these attacks, gaining more stamina over time to keep up. To this, she wondered why, but she was at least grateful for it. Even as she gained stamina, Johnny relentlessly kept attacking her, acting more and more like a savage beast. Jill noticed this while she continued to block.

...it happened because of me, she thought, feeling almost guilty. *...I'm sorry Callous...*

She pulled out the scythe and used it to block Johnny's increasing attacks along with her sword. Seeing that only served to agitate him further, as he began kicking at Jill as well, his razor-sharp feet proving to be just as lethal as his claws. It was tough blocking

Johnny's attacks, no matter how well she was able to keep up.

"It looks like she needs a hand," Sonic said, suspending up into the air.

"...don't overdo it." Shadow said, as he watched the increasingly brutal fight between the two.

"Hey Johnny!" Sonic called, rolling up and charging after Johnny with a Homing Attack.

Johnny's head jolted in Sonic's direction, just in time for him to take the Homing Attack head-on, sending him rocketing away from Jill. *"...Sonic..."* he snarled, Corruption flaring up around him again. *"...if I take you... I'll grow much stronger!"*

"Depends if you can catch me first, Black Breath," Sonic taunted, making a face at him. And since Johnny's attention was on Sonic, Jill took the opportunity to try another slash at Johnny.

Despite having his focus solely on Sonic, Johnny quickly grabbed hold of the blade Jill tried slashing him with, without even glancing at her. " *DON'T UNDERESTIMATE ME!"* he roared, before hurling Jill right at Sonic with tremendous force.

"Ah!" Jill yelped as she flew at Sonic, but being a spirit, she simply passed right through him, and Sonic paid no mind to her as he rolled up for another Homing Attack on Johnny.

This time, however, Johnny actually caught hold of Sonic, forcing him to stay curled up in a ball. *"...you're mine!"* he laughed, as his hands began glowing with Corruption, as he attempted to absorb Sonic.

Sonic tried to spin his way out, but Johnny somehow managed to hold onto him. Jill meanwhile, still shot through the air until she crashed into a tower of the castle.

"Brownie!" Brick cried worriedly.

"Sonic!" Amy cried instead.

"Once I'm done with you..." Johnny chuckled, as he tried absorbing Sonic . *"...I'll take your friends... and then I'll bring back Callous...!"*

At that point, however, Sonic suddenly vanished, and given Johnny's expression, he wasn't responsible for it. *"...what?"* he yelled, as he glared around him. *"Where did he go?"*

"...I can't let you do that, Johnny." Hearing that voice, the lion suddenly turned around, as his eyes widened. "Sonic is mine to kill." At that point, Metal Sonic, in his humanoid form, delivered a punch coated in Purity squarely in Johnny's face, sending him rocketing into the castle with a single punch. "Even if he is only a specter."

Sonic reappeared in another place, wiping his brow. "Whew...thanks Metal. I was in a tight spot," he chuckled.

Milo turned to where Jill had crashed, and suddenly noticed a dark green glow building up inside the tower. "Hm?"

And Ani noticed Milo looking. "What is it Milo?"

Milo pointed at the tower. "Look."

The dark green glow within grew radiantly bright, and the tower started to crack underneath its power. Beams of green light shot through the cracks, and a loud, monstrous wail somehow pierced the air.

Getting up, Johnny quickly glared towards this phenomenon. *"...what is..."*

"That would be the sound of your impending defeat, Johnny." Metal hummed, as he floated closer to the castle, whilst keeping his eyes on the dark lion. "It's over... for you."

That green light shot up into the air, crumbling the tower, and that dark green glow emerged, forming into something. It formed into some sort of...dragon; a sacred dragon made purely out of Unity energy with blazing pure white eyes that found Johnny. This dragon was quite a big beast and it was almost as big as the beast that Johnny conjured up.

"Whoa..." Rudy uttered. "...Jill made a dragon!"

"She didn't just make it..." Milo uttered, looking at that dragon. He could sense her spirit was actually in there... "...she IS that dragon."

The Unity Dragon then outspread its massive wings, reminding everyone of its gargantuan size as it flapped into the air and off the tower. Afterward, it opened its mouth and let out another sharp cry, as Unity energy accumulated within its beak and shot a powerful beam of Unity right at Johnny like a cannon.

"Tsch!" Before the beam could hit Johnny, he quickly took to the skies with his own wings, letting the beam tear off a chunk of the castle. *...I'm going to beat her...* he thought, as he gathered Corruption around his fists.

"Don't forget, Johnny..." At that point, Metal suddenly warped right behind Johnny, reeling his fist backwards. "...you have more than one opponent." Then, with a fist coated in Purity, Metal fiercely punched Johnny's back, sending him flying right at the dragon.

As Johnny came toward the dragon, it reached forward to claw at him with the claws that were made from pure Unity.

He had no chance to avoid that, as a large gash of Unity was cut across his chest. Roaring in pain, Johnny clutched his chest, as he glared at the dragon. *"...won't forgive... won't forgive..."* he uttered with a snarl.

The Unity Dragon roared at him, and then snapped at him intending to crush Johnny in its jaws.

However, Johnny was a lot quicker, flying past the dragon's massive jaws. *"...I'll kill you..."* he snarled, glaring at the dragon.

"I can't allow that." At that point, Metal rocketed towards Johnny, aiming a kick at the lion, who quickly raised his arm to block it.

"...stop getting involved!" Johnny snarled, as he glared at Metal.

"Once you're gone, perhaps I will." Metal replied calmly, as the two were locked in a struggle for power.

And everyone watched this, while the Unity Dragon started building up more energy within its jaws to shoot whenever they released…

"...do you really think you'll win, because you have the advantage of numbers?" Johnny scoffed, glaring at Metal.

"No. I believe that we will win, because we're just stronger than you." Metal replied curtly.

"...but you forget one thing, Metal ..." Johnny chuckled, as he glanced at the dragon. *"...she's a lot bigger than us, isn't she?"* Then, he suddenly pushed Metal away, before an aura of Corruption covered him, just as he rocketed right towards the dragon; more specifically, towards its mouth.

"What's he doing?" Striker gasped.

The Unity Dragon shot its energy in its mouth at Johnny, hoping to stop him.

However, even as the beam hit him dead-on, the aura of Corruption acted as a shield for Johnny, as he flew through the beam, towards the dragon. *"You may be tough on the outside..."* he laughed, his grin growing even bigger. *"...BUT LET'S SEE IF THAT GOES FOR THE INSIDE, TOO!"* Then, he shot right into the dragon's mouth.

The Unity Dragon momentarily choked him down, and started wailing out. Sonic grit his teeth, and started flying toward the dragon. "No!"

"...don't tell me..." Metal uttered, as he flew towards the dragon as well. "...he's going to corrupt it from the inside!"

Within the dragon, Johnny laughed wildly, as Corruption was dripping from his body like he was melting. *"Now... it's time..."* he laughed, as he crossed his arms. *"...for you to disappear, Jill!"* Then, with a roar, Corruption began expanding from his body at a violent rate.

The Unity Dragon shrieked in pain, and Sonic, without thinking, dove right into its mouth as it cried, entering into the dragon.

That idiot! Metal thought, as he followed Sonic right into the dragon's mouth.

On the outside, the Unity Dragon cried again, as it slowly fell off the tower and hit the courtyard, crushing the garden underneath it.

"No!" Brick blurted, spinning around and darting into the castle to run down to the courtyard.

Inside…it was a void of darkness like Miser had traversed into before…

Both Sonic and Metal encountered a bright sphere of glowing Unity energy, which was trying so hard to hold its own against the Corruption. Sonic could only assume that Jill was inside…

"Kkh..." Metal uttered, as he held his arms in pain, thanks to the Corruption around them. "..Sonic. Can you sense Johnny anywhere?" he said, glancing at the spirit beside him.

"…it's hard," Sonic uttered, looking around. "It's like he's all over the place!" He winced. This place was having an effect on him too.

"...we have to stop him." Metal uttered. "If he gets to that core... then it doesn't matter how much Purity we use on her; Callous will resurface... perhaps permanently."

"Yeah," Sonic flew farther toward the sphere, and found that he could simply take a look to see inside. Jill was curled up in a fetal position, looking as if she was asleep. Actually, Sonic thought it kind of looked like she was inside an egg of Unity Energy…

…but that didn't change the fact that Corruption was still eating away at it.

"I don't get it. Unity is supposed to be much stronger than Purity or Corruption," Sonic growled, and then he winced again from the darkness around them.

"...apparently, only if you're truly focused..." Metal muttered, as he looked away from Sonic; his botched attempt at fighting Deity crawling into his mind. "...if not, then Purity and Corruption on its

own could be even stronger..."

"And it doesn't look like Jill can use Purity Energy anymore," Sonic responded. "Makes a risky trade off, doesn't it?"

"Yes…it does."

Sonic flinched, and looked around. "Uh…Metal…did you hear what I heard?"

Blinking, Metal looked around him, as one could see that he was becoming frightened. *...no... no, no! He's supposed to be gone!* he thought.

"I'm gonna take that as a yes," Sonic responded, examining Metal's reaction.

"Johnny…his anger is so powerful…such a thing to feast on. Did he really think he could easily defeat me like that?" After hearing that, the Unity around Jill began to diminish even faster than it had been before.

Seeing that, Metal gritted his teeth, as he ran up to the core. "No! Stop it! Leave her be!" he yelled. Metal was ignored however, as the darkness continued to eat away the Unity, inching closer and closer to Jill. "...I said..." Metal growled, as all of a sudden, his entire body flared with Purity. "...leave her be!" Then, he suddenly pressed his hands against the core, causing Purity to seep into it as well.

Once Metal did that, the Unity stopped disappearing. In fact…it actually began to grow.

"Nice," Sonic remarked.

Snarling, Metal looked around him. "...why don't you show yourself... Deity Novagod?"

"Simply because that wouldn't be smart," the voice replied. The power of the darkness somehow increased, and the Unity began to shrink away again. Not only that, but Sonic clutched his head and tried to keep from screaming. A tremendous pain was hitting him now...

Metal felt that pain, too, but it only drove him to channel more Purity to the core. "...if you think that I'll let either you or Johnny do with her as you please..." he growled, as he closed his eyes. "...then you are sorely mistaken!"

"Is that so?" The Unity was on its last barrier, but Metal's power kept it there, lingering... "I presume it is only so you can take her life yourself?"

"...no." Metal replied bluntly. "But even so... I'd rather be forced to kill her, than to let you and Johnny usurp her power for your own, twisted desires." Then, he glared at Sonic. "Get out! This place is a danger zone for you right now!"

Sonic shot a look of disbelief at Metal. He wanted to protest, but he understood the circumstances were not appropriate for that. Hesitantly, he turned and high tailed as fast as he could, fighting the pain.

"There is something I should correct you on, however," Deity's voice replied. "Johnny no longer has any power...nor does he even have a conscience anymore. The darkness took him completely...and I now use the power he's gained." The darkness tried pressing as hard as it could against the Unity.

Gritting his teeth, Metal focused even more Purity to the core, gritting his teeth. "...but you... will not... get to her!" he grunted, fighting off the pain.

"We shall see..."

Inside that egg of Unity energy, she was not aware of the dangers right at her doorstep. Jill was lost in her own mind, wondering how she got here...what was going on?

Then, only within her own mind, she heard a familiar voice call her name... *"...Jill..."*

She was slow to respond, but was surprised to hear that voice. *"...Johnny?"*

"...Jill..." Soon, she was able to see a faint outline of that lion in her

mind; however, there was no Corruption covering his body this time around. Now, he looked just as he did before his second death, gaping hole through his chest and all.

Jill was silent while she saw this image in her head... but somehow, she uttered something that she didn't expect to say. *"...I'm sorry this happened to you...I'm sorry about what happened to Callous..."*

"...just shut up..." Johnny uttered, as he closed his eyes. *"...I don't wanna imagine her talking like you... being so damn apologetic..."*

Jill became quiet, and waited for him to speak.

"...I wanna know..." Johnny eventually continued, as he looked at Jill. *"...if I die... will I ever see her again...?"*

Jill wasn't sure how to answer that. She knew that Callous still likely existed inside of her...but because Deity had created her in the first place, she didn't know what would become of Callous, now that Callous had returned to her. *"...maybe when my time comes...she might find a way..."* Jill supposed. *"...she has that knack..."*

"...then I'll just have to wait for her..." Johnny hummed, before actually smiling. *"...I can live with that."*

Then, he raised his arm, as some form of bubble suddenly wrapped around Jill. While there was nothing within it to harm her, all of a sudden, darkness began appearing outside of the bubble, as Johnny was slowly covered in Corruption once more.

"...what are you doing?" Jill asked.

"...Deity thinks he can use my darkness to get rid of you..." Johnny said, without losing his smile. *"...he thinks I'm completely lost to darkness... well, he's an idiot with a capital I."* At that point, all the Corruption around them began expanding outwards, though Jill remained protected by the bubble. *"...I think it's time to show him who truly was superior in using Corruption."* Then, before the darkness swallowed him completely, he managed to utter one last sentence: *"...Jack... the Agents... give them my best."*

In that instant, Metal was forced to retract his hands; even covered

in Purity, the burning sensation of Corruption stung the surface of the core. "...what on earth..." he uttered, as he saw what happened within the core; Jill's body was sealed within a bubble, whilst the Corruption that Deity had forced into the core was forcibly moving outwards.

In all his time, the bat demon never expressed any form of emotion whatsoever...

...at this moment, his response had a small hint of surprise. "...hm?"

"...what's going on...?" Metal uttered, as he stepped back in awe, watching the Corruption expand further and further.

...run, Toaster.

Hearing that voice in his head, Metal looked around him in shock, but somehow, he knew that the voice had reason to tell him to flee. Therefore, he instantly headed for the exit.

Once he was gone, all around, Deity heard laughter coming from the darkness; Johnny's laughter. *"...two words, Novagod..."* he said. *"...I win."*

The moment Metal managed to escape from the dragon's mouth, all of a sudden, a massive explosion of Corruption erupted from within the dragon, obliterating it in seconds, and blowing everyone near the explosion a good distance away. Everyone tried to shield themselves from the explosion. While the spirits could all catch themselves in the air, others had to provide for themselves; Ani and Hunter put a barrier that managed to soften the blow for them, Brick and the kids, and Cal used his own force of Corruption to do the same. Sage, too, put up a psychic barrier to shield those that Hunter and Ani couldn't get to, whilst Shadow, using the Corruption implanted within the android unit, shielded himself as well.

Soon, the explosion faded out, leaving everyone to gaze down into the crater it left behind, though the smoke rising from it made it difficult to see if anything remained.

Watching the crater, Metal placed a hand against his head. *...did*

Johnny do this...? he thought. *...so... I suppose he's finally gone...*

"...Brownie?" Brick murmured worriedly, sweeping past everyone toward the crater.

It seemed like an eternity went by before the smoke showed any signs of dispersing, but eventually, it began fading, letting everyone see what was within the crater.

Brick hopped into it before he even got a look at what was inside the crater, but to his relief, he saw what he wanted to see.

Jill was lying there limp in the center of the crater.

"Brownie!" he called, running to her.

Seeing that, Metal let out a sigh of relief. *...she's alright...* he thought, wiping his brow. *...but... where did Novagod go?*

Just as everyone else made it to the crater, Brick picked her up and gently started shaking her."Brownie...wake up," he called, and at first Jill didn't move, but then a faint moan came as a response from her, and Brick shook her more. "Brownie, c'mon...wake up!" When Brick stopped shaking her, she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"Brick," she murmured. "...what happened?"

"There was this huge explosion!" Jack suddenly chimed in, as he looked down at Jill.

"And that dragon went bye-bye!" Lin said, as she waved her left arms around enthusiastically.

"And then you were lying in the crater!" Tails Doll called.

Jill smiled at their responses. "...what a nice way to sum it up," she said, as Brick helped her up onto her feet.

"So, does this mean...it's all over?" Striker said, looking at everyone. "...we won?"

Cal felt a disturbance appear so suddenly that he jumped. "...n-no, it's not over," he uttered shakily, turning quickly behind him.

Over there, it was a small puddle, but there was Corruption lying there in its black goo form...and it was bubbling actively.

"No way!" King uttered in surprise. "When the hell is he gonna give up?"

"That's not Johnny." Metal uttered, as he glared at the bubbling Corruption. "...this time... Johnny truly is dead."

"...then what is...?" Wiper uttered, as he looked at the Corruption as well.

"...you guys stand back." Lock said, as he hoisted his rifle off his back, before walking in front of the group. "I'll take care of him."

"Not alone, you won't." Miser said bravely, stepping next to Lock.

Jill looked at that pile of goo cautiously, and the more she stared at it, the more she noticed that it wasn't intending to take shape...it was beginning to grow and expand... "...guys..." she uttered with wide eyes, trying to stay calm. "...we need to get off of here...now..."

"...why?" Lock inquired, as he glanced at Jill. "What's wrong?"

"Don't ask questions." Metal said, as he gave Sage a quick nod. "We need to go, right now."

"...alright..." Sage nodded, as she caught everyone but Metal and the spirits in a psychic bubble, before taking to the sky, flying towards the floating city, with Metal and the spirits quickly following suite.

The minute Sage took off into the air, a spout of Corruption spat out, and all of a sudden, a tidal wave of the goo consumed the courtyard in a matter of seconds. The goo crawled into the castle, and soon oozed out of each of the windows on its way up, as well as through the holes in the wall made from the battle. The goo was making quick work consuming not only the castle, but the very piece of land it was on, while some of it even dripped off the cliffs and down into

the stormy sky below it.

"Wow...that looks messy," Sonic remarked.

Jill shook her head, desperately trying to deny what she saw. "No...no, no! No matter what I've done...he always comes back!"

"Who?" Gale uttered, since seeing Jill this uneasy certainly made her shaky.

"Deity Novagod, that's who!" Jill blurted.

"HIM?" King yelled. "No way! I thought Johnny killed that bastard!"

"...he was never killed to begin with." Metal muttered, as he rubbed his temples. "In fact, I'd bet that he had been leeching off of Johnny's power, ever since Johnny absorbed him. But Johnny managed to turn the tables within the dragon... but only temporarily, it seems."

"...he never stops," Jill uttered in disdain. "...he just comes back...he just grows again..."

"Well then, we'll have to stunt his growth, won't we?" Jill jumped, and turned around to stare at Knuckles, the one who had said that. He still looked relaxed throughout all this; he even had a smile on his face.

"...Knuckles...?" Jill muttered weakly.

Knuckles simply looked behind him, for something appeared off in the distance of the storm. Two figures were carrying something toward them, and the closer they got, the more everyone could distinguish the two. It was Tikal and Chaos...and they were carrying the Master Emerald through the air toward them.

"...looks like we're getting reinforcements." Metal hummed.

Hearing a roar, everyone looked back at the monstrous mass of goo on the castle, and just as it completely submerged the castle within itself, it started to form into something. The top of it grew into a large head, and formed into a dragon head, much like Jill's dragon...but

just about 10 times much bigger. It was so big...all of them were but tiny ants to its mere head.

"Holy cow..." Ani muttered weakly.

"...we're not done, yet." Metal uttered, as he hovered above the group. "See what Chaos and Tikal intends for us to do with the Master Emerald; I'll keep that monster at bay for a while."

Knuckles simply looked up at Metal, and then back at the dragon. "Have fun with it," he bid the hedgehog, watching that dragon grow a long neck, and start to gain claws; but the process was so slow, it would take nearly forever for this beast to fully generate. That was when Tikal and Chaos made it to the group.

"Knuckles...what is it you're going to do with the Master Emerald?" Jill asked.

"I'm going to allow you guys to use the Master Emerald in that giant cannon of yours," Knuckles answered. "...it'll be a key to defeating Deity."

"...what?" Jill was at a loss. A way to defeat Deity Novagod for good?

As Metal landed on top of the tallest building of Metropolis, he looked towards the dragon, an impassive look in his eyes. "...I may not be able to transform my body while I'm in this form..." he uttered, as he raised his arms. "...but my technology can still be used to form..."

At that point, rocketing up above Metal was the entirety of his robotic army, swarming above the Metallix wildly. Then, from out of Metal's hand, tendrils of liquid metal shot forth, entangling themselves around the robotic swarm, taking a different sort of shape. It took a relatively short amount of time for the people watching him to realize what he did; binding his armies together within a draconic shell that the spirits would instantly recognize.

The Metal Overlord.

"Well, what do ya know," Sonic snickered, seeing this out of Metal.

Jill looked back, and saw that the Corruption Dragon was continuing to build, and in the goo all around it, long tentacles began to extend, and headed for them. "Uh, guys! We'd better retreat inside Metropolis!" she called, causing everyone to see the tentacles come.

They all grabbed one another and did so, heading quickly toward the tallest tower of the city. "Knuckles, we have to get the Master Emerald to that cannon!" Jill said. She wasn't sure how the cannon worked, but hopefully there would be a way to figure it out.

"You can't use it on the cannon itself!" Tails Doll said, as he fluttered by Jill. *"You need to follow me; I'll show you where it's power source lies!"* Then, he fluttered away from the tower, headed into one of the buildings around the tower. Jill, Knuckles, Tikal and Chaos all changed direction to follow Tails Doll, while all the others retreated inside the tower.

Seeing the incoming tentacles, Metal frowned, as he pointed his arm at the dragon. "Send Novagod a message." he uttered.

The moment he said that, the Overlord let out a deafening roar, as it swooped down from the sky, firing a blue beam in a path that cut straight through the tentacles, along with the storm itself. The Corruption Dragon let out a sharp roar when the Overlord did that, and so since its claws had generated long enough, it tried to swipe at the Overlord. However, being a lot smaller in size compared to the Corruption Dragon, Overlord simply swooped past the slash, before firing missiles at the dragon, which exploded into ice crystals upon impact.

As the group followed Tails Doll, they all went into an underground passage, lit only by the glowing gem keeping the plushie floating in the air. As the group descended, they could hear the roars of not only the Corruption Dragon, but also those of Overlord. *"...Big Bro's really going all out..."* Tails Doll uttered.

"...I hope he's careful," Jill said.

"Metal, careful?" Knuckles joked, getting a sour look from Jill. "Calm down...I'm sure he'll be fine."

"...he'll win." Tails Doll said with a nod. *"No doubt about it."* At that point, the group stopped by a pair of doors; closed. *"...Big Bro's the only one with the key, so..."* Then, he glanced at Knuckles and Chaos. "...can you break down the door?"

"Sure can," Knuckles said, cracking up his...uh, knuckles, while Tikal and Chaos lowered the Master Emerald gently to the ground.

Before they could do anything though, they were stopped by a voice, "Now hang on. Might need some help with that, right?" Rouge came up past them, and smirked at Knuckles while he frowned.

"...even when you're dead, you're still after the Master Emerald?" Knuckles supposed.

Rouge looked offended. "What? You don't think I'd actually want to help you guys?" Then she softened with another smirk and chuckled. "...okay, I'll admit that I still want to be around it...but I don't really have any way to take it, so don't get fussy."

So the three of them rushed at the door; Knuckles with a punch, Rouge with a firm kick, and Chaos with his...watery hands.

The door stood no chance, as it was violently torn from its hinges, crashing within the room. The moment it stopped, the group could see seven bright lights. *"...there they are..."*

There, placed on seven different pedestals, and encased within a dome, was the seven Chaos Emeralds, each of them glowing brightly within the dome. Looking at the top of it, they could see some form of cable going from it to a computer; however, three more cables extended from the computer into three smaller domes around the center one; each of these smaller domes containing what seemed to be Purity in one, Corruption in another, and Unity within the third.

"The pedestals are what's keeping the city floating." Tails Doll said, as he fluttered up to the cable connected to the Chaos Emerald dome. *"If we want to use the Master Emerald's power, we need to connect this cable to it."*

"That shouldn't be a problem," Jill said, as Tikal and Chaos went to pick back up the Master Emerald.

Meanwhile, the Corruption Dragon had grown more since last time, and now the goo extended out from its back in order to begin forming its wings. From the goo all around it that still generated, more tentacles came out; much larger ones than those that had pursued the others, and shot them at the Overlord to constrict it. However, Overlord was still faster than the Corruption Dragon, as it flew up into the sky, firing a combination of freezing missiles and blue beams at the dark dragon.

"...kkh..." Still standing on the tower, Metal watched this fight. "It's only growing bigger... would they hurry up, already?"

Each of the attacks hit the Corruption Dragon, and it cried out, but it only regenerated in the spot that the blue beams hit, and the Corruption only broke free of the ice crystal, shattering it, as it continued to grow.

Back inside the room, they had finally gotten the cables hooked up to the Master Emerald like Tails Doll instructed.

"Alright!" Tails Doll cheered. *"Now, we just need to let Big Bro know that he can fire the cannon! I'll tell him..."* Then, he closed his eyes... and nothing happened. *"...hm?"* Blinking, he tilted his head. *"...I can't get*

in touch with him! Either that, or he's too busy fighting the dragon to notice me!"

"Then one of us ghosties will have to go tell him," Rouge said, sighing. "With that, I say bye-bye to the Master Emerald..." she simply flew up to the ceiling and disappeared through, leaving them.

"...I hope Big Bro's alright..." Tails Doll muttered, as he fluttered over to the computer, checking its readings.

Suddenly, the room shook so vilolently that everyone was immediately knocked off their feet onto the ground; well, mainly Jill, since Tails Doll and the spirits were floating, and Chaos just jiggled

since he was a water creature.

But everyone in the tower fell over in total shock. The entire city itself was so suddenly shaken, almost as if it was stricken with something. Thanks to the fact that the Corruption Dragon now had wings, it had propelled itself through the air and rammed into Metropolis with the piece of land it was on, having caused the tremor.

The only one who still stood standing was Metal, who glared down at the dragon. "Kindly keep yourself away from my city!" he called, just as Overlord shot a massive, blue beam at its elongated neck, intending to tear right through it.

It almost did. The beam tore a gaping hole right through, but the Corruption Dragon only roared again, while the hole shrank away from its neck. Then gooey tentacles came at it from all over, and not only that, but the dragon shot its own dark red beam straight at the Overlord from its mouth.

Still, Overlord had the advantage in terms of speed, soaring past the dark beam as it led the tentacles away from the city, keeping up a constant barrage of beams aimed at the dragon.

...it won't last forever... Metal thought, as he clenched his hands into fists. *...are they not done yet?*

"Oh Metal-Hedge," sang a voice, just in time for Rouge to pop up beside him. "They're all set to go," she said, and then noticed that the Corruption Dragon was much bigger than when she went down in that passageway. "Whoa...he looks pretty serious with that thing, doesn't he?"

Just then, dark spheres of Corruption appeared and rotated around the neck of the Corruption Dragon, until the spheres of Corruption grew large enough, and when they halted their rotation, they were flung at the Overlord one by one in attempts to shoot it down.

Still, Overlord swept past the incoming spheres, as its body began glowing red-hot.

"...good to hear." Metal replied to Rouge, as he quickly began descending. "You should take cover; we'll have another explosion on our hands soon."

Roaring, Overlord was looking like it was suffering from a meltdown, as it flew right at the massive dragon, crashing into its side; the moment it did that, however, Overlord erupted into a massive explosion, which propelled the Corruption Dragon away from Metropolis. It was a great enough impact to blow the Corruption Dragon backwards, and again, it roared. Now it had grown even further, gaining a large belly and achieving such a colossal height…

"MAN, that thing is HUGE!" Ani shouted, watching from a window of the tower.

"I know!" Jack said in disbelief. "Man... if it wasn't evil, I'd want to limb it!"

"...why?" Punk uttered dryly.

"Because... it'd be an adventure!" Jack replied.

Before Punk could even hope to figure out a reply to that, a blue blur suddenly shot past the group, headed for the tower's control room.

"Wah?" At first Brick thought it was Sonic, but then he saw the hedge afloat nearby; so he concluded it must have been Metal. Speaking of Sonic, he turned and immediately followed wherever Metal went.

Down below in the room, Knuckles raised his hands before the Master Emerald.

" *The servers are the seven chaos…"* he began to chant.

Racing through the halls, Metal gritted his teeth. *...I can only hope that sacrificing Overlord proved to be advantageous.* he thought, before he eventually reached the control room. *Now, Novagod... it's finally time for you to disappear!* Then, he sat down by the nearest computer, typing several commands onto the interface.

" *Chaos is power, enriched by the heart…"*

Slowly, the cannon's muzzle, along with the top part of the tower it was situated on, rotated towards the large dragon. ...I need to line up a perfect shot... Metal thought, adjusting the aim.

" *The controller serves to unify the chaos…"*

The Master Emerald began to glow, and Knuckles opened his eyes to it, raising his hands higher. "Master Emerald," he said. "Please give us the power to stop this halt this evil in its tracks!"

As the shot was finally lined up perfectly, Metal input one final command; the firing sequence. Finishing it, one of the buttons on the interface began glowing red. ...this is it... with one push... it'll all be over for him.

The Master Emerald in the room began to get brighter and brighter, to a point where it blinded Jill and Tails Doll.

The Corruption Dragon started flapping its wings, and moved itself toward Metropolis with the intention to ram it.

"AH! It's COMING!" Rudy uttered fearfully.

"...3..."

Watching the incoming dragon, Sage gritted her teeth, as she closed her eyes. ...not even a psychic barrier's gonna hold against that...

"...2..."

"...damn it..." Lock cursed, as he looked down at the ground.

"...1..."

"...it's almost here!" Jack cried.

"...FIRE!"

In that instant, from the cannon's muzzle, a massive, green beam rocketed out from it, the recoil from the sheer power actually pushing Metropolis a bit back, as the beam sailed towards the Corruption Dragon.

The beam struck the belly, plunging into the goo and into its heart. The Corruption Dragon let out a painful shrill, writhing about as it tried to deal with the pain; a gaping hole in its stomach.

"What a blow," Cal remarked in wide eyed astonishment. Then he grit his teeth again…the goo was beginning to regenerate from the blow.

But then he and the others noticed something. It was slowing down from its previous rapid rate of growth…

…eventually the goo actually stopped moving all together, lying limp and dormant. The Corruption Dragon then roared in protest.

"The goo…it stopped growing!" Boomer uttered.

"...it can't regenerate..." Ripper uttered in surprise.

"That didn't do the trick?" Metal hummed, before pressing the button again. "Perhaps a second salvo will!" On cue, yet another massive beam shot from the cannon, aimed at the large dragon once more.

When it hit, the Corruption Dragon shrieked again, and the goo was boiling madly away while it began to smoke.

"Again!" Without any mercy, Metal pressed the button yet again, firing a third beam from the cannon.

This built so much stress on the cannon that after it fired, it started to crack and fall apart, and a warning was indicated on Metal's computer screen.

When the beam hit the dragon, it let out just one more painful cry, and then its dark red eyes closed, while the head fell limply. But nothing else happened; the Corruption Dragon and the goo remained still on that piece of land.

Breathing heavily, Metal ignored the warning screen, as he brought up a video feed of what was going on outside, letting him see the fallen dragon. "...it's... done." he uttered, before sighing in relief.

Cal kept looking at it, his eyes squinting. *Something's still not right…*

he thought. "…I still sense something off about that dragon," Cal murmured, catching everyone's attention.

And then it opened its eyes, and glared madly at Metropolis while the dragon let out another roar.

"It's still alive?" Jack blurted out in panic.

"...I had a feeling..." Metal groaned, as he rubbed his temples, before going back to the screen with the button. *...it won't hold more than one shot... I need the timing to be perfect, or we're all dead...*

Knuckles looked at the Master Emerald, seeing it's glow fading. "Looks like that did it," Knuckles said.

"Did what?" Jill asked. "...is Deity dead?"

"No, but the Master Emerald stopped his transformation, and enabled it so he couldn't regenerate anymore," Knuckles said.

"But...but how did you...?" Jill was at a loss, and she could only look at Knuckles questionably.

Knuckles looked at Jill. "Listen...now wouldn't be a good time to explain all that. His regeneration process has been stopped, and in the middle of the transformation too, so Deity is stuck in there. But that doesn't mean he's totally powerless. In fact, right now he probably has more power than he did before...so you have to go in there and attack him at the source to get it done."

"...but...what if he feeds on my Unity?" Jill asked. "Unity is a mixture of the three energies...and Corruption has the tendency to feed on Chaos Energy and overpower Purity..."

"Not if his regeneration was disabled, and if your Unity is stronger than anything he can fight with," Knuckles said. "Don't forget...there are the seven Chaos Emeralds."

"Are you saying...that I should use the seven Emeralds?" Jill asked, astonished.

"Really?" Tails Doll uttered, as he fluttered by Knuckles. *"...but if she*

uses them, we'll only be able to stay in the air for no longer than an hour; maybe even less, depending on how much energy we've spent on the cannons!" As he said that, he looked at Jill. *"...so if you do it, you need to do it quickly..."*

Jill looked at Tails Doll uneasily, and closed her eyes. "...I can't do it alone," she said, and while saying it, images flashed back from the very beginning. Metal stealing the Chaos Emeralds from Shadow...turning Super...he could use Unity as well, and with the two of them using the emeralds...She reopened her eyes then, looking at Tails Doll again. "I need you to go get your Big Bro and tell him that I'll need his help," she said.

"...really?" Tails Doll uttered, as he tilted his head. Then... *"...alright... I'll get him."* Then, he fluttered off.

Jill then turned and looked at the emeralds...

...then she raised her hand. One by one, each of the emeralds rose into the air and came to her, slowly rotating around her. They lit her way as she turned and walked back through the passageway that Tails Doll led them through, so Tikal and Chaos followed her, but Knuckles remained with the emerald.

Beside Metal, Sonic's head perked up. "...hey Metal...did you feel that?" he uttered.

"...I did..." Metal uttered, as he glanced around him. "...but what..."

"BIG BRO!" At that point, Tails Doll fluttered into the control room, stopping by Metal. *"Big Bro... Jill's gonna take down Novagod... and she needs your help!"*

"...are you... serious?" Metal uttered, as he looked at Tails Doll in disbelief.

Sonic peeked out a window, and he pointed. "He's right. Look."

Everyone else noticed too. Outside, Jill emerged from the underground passageway from a building, and she walked through the streets which each of the emeralds continuing to rotate around her, glowing. This was a sight to behold, making everyone's eyes

widen in awe.

"What's Jill doing?" Striker asked, with Buddy questioning it as well, "Chao?"

"...she's..." Tails Doll uttered. *"...going inside the dragon."*

"...I see..." Metal hummed, as he stood up. "...I won't take long." Then, he left the room.

Jill stepped out toward the edge of the city, and the blistering winds from the storm all around swept up her hair, just as she stopped and looked up at that massive dragon. It saw her, and of course, gave an angry roar at her, but it didn't do anything else other than that.

This is it... she thought. *...we're finally going to take him down...and he's going to be gone this time...*

"...did someone call for backup?" At that point, Metal walked up next to Jill, looking at the dragon. "...it's time to end it... once and for all."

"Yeah," Jill answered, just as the Chaos Emeralds started expanding, rotating around the two of them now.

The Corruption Dragon, and those inside the tower watched, while the two of them slowly rose into the air with the power of the seven Chaos Emeralds. Sonic only wished he could be part of this, but he knew that he had to hand down the torch to someone else now...

As the two emeralds rotated around them, they could feel their power increasing by the second, and a brilliant glow emerged from the area they hovered in. Then, a massive flash occurred, covering Jill and Metal in its brilliant light.

Once it faded, before everyone, two beings of unimaginable powered hovered.

Metal, unlike the last time he had undergone a Super transformation, still retained his usual shape, though his fur had turned from a blue color into a golden one, and the silver linings along his quills were glowing on their own as well. His eyes had turned from red to a clear blue, and suspended above his palms

were two silvery spheres, which were glowing all on their own as well.

Jill's jacket was gone, and instead, there was a pale green ribbon intertwined through her arms from behind. Many other things had appeared on her; two green jeweled bracelets, and the same kind of jeweled halo over her head. Then came the angelic wing of pure energy that grew out from her right shoulder blade, and the demonic wing of dark energy that grew out of her left like before. That wasn't the last of it either, for a shower of golden sparkles responsible for her transformation had swept over her, changing her color. She had golden waves in her hair, light golden skin, and even her once maroon curled horns were now golden. Jill herself seemed to radiate with that golden glow.

Her eyes opened, and showed that they had become blind, and godly pale. At least, they appeared to be blind, but Jill could see.

"Look at them..." Boomer uttered in a daze. "...I'd never thought I'd see a sight like that..."

"They're...marvelous," Gale remarked, awestruck.

"...so... that's a Super Transformation..." Miser uttered, as she watched the two in the same awe.

"...they've both grown in power..." Queen hummed.

"...impressive." Lock noted, as he folded his arms.

Seeing this sight, Shadow couldn't help but smile. *...both of you... good luck.*

Glancing back at Jill, Metal gave her a nod. " *Well, then... shall we?"*

Jill looked at him, and nodded.

The Corruption Dragon growled at such a bright light that came from them, but they paid no mind to it. In a blur, the two launched themselves through the air toward it, aiming straight for the head and mainly, the mouth, where they would enter inside of it. The dragon knew they were heading there, and in an effort to stop them,

the dragon conjured up more spheres of dark red Corruption and flung them.

Before they could reach, however, the left sphere that Metal held began rotating at a rapid rate, quickly expanding into a shield of sort that protected both Jill and Metal, deflecting all the Corruption orbs, without any negative repercussions for the two.

The Corruption Dragon roared again, and despite the fact that it couldn't regenerate, it tried to throw its gooey tentacles at them.

Scoffing, Metal hurled the sphere he held in his right hand at the incoming tentacles, as it began rotating rapidly as well. Soon, it was acting like a buzzsaw, slicing through every single tentacle in its path, before it eventually returned to Metal's hand, turning into a sphere once more.

There was nothing else the Corruption Dragon could do, and as it roared angrily at them, they took that opportunity to jump inside, and the dragon choked them down.

"...be careful Brownie," Brick murmured.

Chapter 85

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-FIVE

Inside was another void, but this void was made out of a very, very dark red atmosphere...

"...Corruption..." Metal muttered, as he glanced around him. *"...much more potent than Johnny's... be on your guard, Jill."*

With a nod, Jill looked cautiously around, and then her eye caught something. *"Over there,"* she pointed. Double doors...ones she recognized, here in this void. But why here?

"...he's hiding behind those, right?" Metal inquired, as he slowly approached the double doors. "...nowhere to hide..."

Jill accompanied him, going towards those doors. If she thought those doors led to the place she was thinking of...oh, she had hoped that wasn't the case, but somehow, she knew it had to be it. She pushed open the door, only for them to pop open for them, and show them what was behind them.

It was that chapel. Both of them should recognize it; Metal, because he had been here twice before, and Jill, because she had seen this place in her dreams. But this chapel was not in ruins, nor was it holy. The pews were gone entirely, thick with a slightly dark reddish air and a red carpet led up to a platform. On this platform, there was a stretch of some kind of...black muscle tissue, with pulsing veins, and it constricted the very man they were looking for. Deity's hair was a rat's nest, and his face was messed up, covered in strange markings ,and bulging with veins from his face and throughout his arms; truly an ugly, gory sight when they just saw his upper part of the body, and the rest was presumably within the black muscle tissue that held him there. Right now, his eyes were closed...

Seeing this grotesque sight, Metal frowned, as he regarded a silent nod to Jill; motioning for her to follow him forward, as he slowly approached Deity.

As they moved up toward that platform, Jill jumped. The doors right behind them slammed shut, and when she glanced back, they vanished from sight, leaving no visible way of leaving this place. Then when she looked up toward Deity, they witnessed him open his eyes. The white of it was now black, and dark red eyes gave such a death glare at them. Seeing these two here with such a radiant glow made the mutated vampire give a feral hiss.

However, even looking at that creature Deity had become, Metal remained undaunted. *"...this is it, Jill."* he uttered, as he held the two spheres ready. *"The moment of truth."*

After Metal said that, Deity made a shrill of a screech, piercing any hearing, and from all around, the shadows stirred. Out of the ground, the shadows stood up in a gooey, sluggish rise, and all of them approached the two of them like the undead in slow steps. Jill frowned, and lashed out her arms as a dark golden wave shot out, cutting all of them in half and having them fall. But even after she did that, more arose. Jill ignored them and charged for Deity, but when she made the attempt to hit him, a dark red shield blocked her path, shooting her backwards painfully.

Before she could hit the ground, Metal grabbed her, as he held the right sphere directly above him, as the shadows slowly encircled them. Then, as the sphere began rotating, Metal pulled Jill to the floor, as the sphere rotated so rapidly that it cut through the advancing shades, expanding across the entire chapel room.

So many of the shades fell, and the sphere bounced so quickly that any reoccurring shade was rid of as well. Dark red spheres of Corruption came up around Deity, and like the dragon had done, launched each of them one by one at them.

However, like the dragon's attempt, Metal disrupted it by using the left sphere as a shield to deflect the orbs, as the right sphere was still shredding the shades to pieces.

Jill took this time to build her own sphere of dark golden Unity energy, and when the most opportune moment came, she shot it right at the dark red shield. It struck, and the shield remained...

...but a small crack appeared.

"Looks like we'll have to break it if we want to get him," Jill said.

"Seems that way." Metal hummed, as the two spheres returned to their original shapes and to him, for him to juggle them about. *"Let's see if this works..."* As he said that, he glanced at the right sphere he held, as dark golden Unity appeared around it. Then, he hurled the sphere directly at a nearby wall, though instead of going through the wall, the Unity caused it to bounce off, right into a different wall, which it bounced off as well. For each bounce, the ball increased in velocity, and not only did it bounce off the chapel walls, but also the remaining shades, and the shield protecting Deity.

Ricocheting like that gained some advantage, and the minute that it struck the shield protecting Deity, it shattered. With that, the shades disappeared, leaving Deity completely open.

"Now!" Jill rose to her feet, and a golden glow summoned her sword... *"...huh?"*

It was a sword, yes, but different than her holy blade. One arm of the hilt had an angel wing like the holy blade did, but the other arm had a demonic wing; this was much like her own wings. The blade itself seemed to be made of gold, with strange symbols indented in the metal that were alien to her...yet, she understood them. *Light and Darkness live together, not apart,* was what Jill translated it as. *...weird,* she thought, but at the same time, it was pretty neat.

Instead of wasting time marveling her new-found blade though, she charged at Deity and quickly started slashing at him countless times. Deity only shrieked in pain as a response each time she slashed.

When the sphere returned to Metal, he allowed Unity to cover it, as both of the spheres began morphing, until Metal held a golden sword in his right hand, and a golden shield in his left. Cracking his neck, Metal charged right at Deity, assisting Jill in delivering slash after slash against the vampire.

Deity cried out even more. It must have done some damage, but it wasn't quite showing anything other than Deity squirming in his

agony. Eventually, a powerful force of Corruption blew them both away, and that dark red shield reappeared in place. The shades started coming back, but this time, they were quicker, and they looked like creatures with claws. One of them lurched at Metal with these claws.

However, the claw found itself scraping the surface of the golden shield, which actually caused the shade to burst into golden flames; the gold on Metal's equipment was dormant Unity Energy. *"Your turn to remove that shield, Jill!"* Metal called, as he swiftly decapitated the burning shade with one swing of his blade.

"Right!" And Jill figured that things would go a lot quicker if she used her blade to break the shield, so she ran at it and started hitting it. While it began to crack again, a few shades were ominously approaching her from behind, and whether or not she knew it was there, she was too busy to defend herself from them.

Thankfully, however, Metal wasn't as busy, as he swiftly cut down the approaching shades, glaring at the rest of the horde. *"I'll cover you."* he said, slamming the hilt of the sword against the shield a few times to create a loud gong, in order to intimidate the shades.

The shades shook at its sound, but while some of them backed away, others still attacked; or tried to anyway, before they suddenly vanished. *"Got it!"* Jill blurted, jutting forward and starting her series of slashes at Deity again.

Glancing around the chapel, Metal made sure to keep himself close to Jill, making sure not to let anything crawl up on him to catch him off guard.

Deity let out his cries of pain as Jill slashed, until something shot out of the black muscle tissue around him and snatched Jill, *"Agh!"* They were tentacles with more bulging veins, and pulsing with dark red Corruption no less, making her scream.

Hearing Jill scream, however, Metal whirled around. *"Damn it!"* he cursed, as he rushed right at the tentacles, slashing through each of them to force them to let go of Jill.

Once the tentacles were dislocated and released Jill, another force of Corruption blew them backwards, while the dark red shield reappeared yet again. Jill found the strange markings on herself, but her regenerative healing made quick work getting rid of them. That was when the two of them saw something weirder.

A bulge extended out from where Deity's stomach would be, and the skin split, revealing a large eye that looked the same as Deity's eyes. The red eye began to illuminate a now much darker room, and Corruption built up inside it. Jill could sense the levels of Corruption...and her eyes widened, *"Uh-oh..."*

On cue, the eye widened, and shot out a magnificent ray of dark red Corruption like some kind of cannon.

Before the beam could reach them, Metal leaped in its path, before pushing the shield forward, letting the dark-red beam collide with the shield; surprisingly, it managed to keep the beam at bay somewhat, without shattering. *"...once you get rid of the shield again... attack that eye, Jill!"* he called, glancing at the ewe. *"It must be a weak point of his!"*

Jill slipped past Metal out of the ray's way, and worked to break down the shield again with her sword as the Corruption tried harder and harder to push against Metal's shield.

The force of the beam was pushing Metal backwards, but still, the golden shield stood strong, as Metal focused his energy on keeping it stable. *...you can do it, Jill...* he thought.

Jill finally pierced through the shield, and tried to take a slash at the eye. It definitely had an effect, stopping the ray of Corruption as the eye shut tight, and Deity screamed much louder than he did before.

The chapel started to quiver then, making Jill step away. *"…w-what's going on?"* she uttered, trying to keep her footing from the shaking.

Glancing around him, Metal gritted his teeth. *"I wish I knew, Jill..."* he muttered.

Jill suddenly felt her feet pulled down from under her, and she flew up in the air while looking down. The floor itself was crumbling away, disappearing into that dark red void that they had been in before.

Floating up after Jill, Metal watched the floor crumble away. *"...an attempt to kill us... or a move of desperation?"* he hummed.

As they watched, they saw the entire chapel crumble away to nothingness in the void, except the platform that Deity was on. The dark red shield returned, and this time, *two* eyes opened up on the black muscle tissue around Deity. Illuminating with more Corruption, the two eyes shot out small, but numerous beams of dark red Corruption that flew out and the beams closed in to hit them from all around.

However, Metal wasn't outsmarted yet. Raising his shield, it suddenly expanded to encircle both him and Jill, protecting them from the beams. *"...this is getting annoying..."* he muttered, as he glanced at Jill. *"We're not getting anywhere like this."*

Jill looked back at Deity, and mostly at the two eyes. Spontaneously, she shot through bravely away from the protection of Metal, and the beams of Corruption began following her like homing missiles, leaving Metal.

She stopped right in front of Deity, waiting for the beams to come, and just when they would hit her, she leaped away and the beams rained down on the dark red shield instead, shattering it under all that impact.

"...not bad." Metal chuckled, as the shield reverted to its original size, before Metal flew right at Deity, quickly stabbing his sword right into one of the eyes.

Instead of Deity crying out, something else roared in pain; and it sounded an awful lot like the Corruption Dragon from outside. Upon pulling the sword out from the eye, it tore and bled, with its blood leaking into the void.

"… *Deity never bleeds…"* Jill uttered, realizing that this potentially did more damage to him than anything she ever did in the past.

"...looks like we've got him on the ropes, now." Metal hummed, as he swung his sword at the air, which caused the blood coating it to fly off. *"Let's finish him!"* Then, before Deity or Jill could react, Metal stabbed the sword into the second eye.

There was that monstrous roar again, as the second eye began bleeding. This brought the original eye from before to open, building up its ray within the irises.

" *No you don't!"* Jill said, drawing her sword and stabbing that third eye.

Somehow, when Jill stabbed that eye, a small crack appeared across Deity's forehead which emitted a pure white light, and Deity looked at Jill with a death glare as he hissed.

Glancing at this, Metal's gaze narrowed, as he pulled the sword out of the eye. Then, he flew towards Jill, before driving his sword into that eye as well.

The glowing crack grew across Deity's face, and he screamed. Then he reached forward with his hand and grabbed Jill's neck. His sharp nails dug into her neck, giving puncture wounds to her that bled, and the strength of Deity's mutated arm likely choked Jill severely.

Seeing that, Metal's eyes widened. *"...son of a-"* he growled, before pulling the sword out of the eye, just as he viciously swung down at the hand holding Jill, cutting it cleanly off the vampire's arm.

Jill pulled away, yanking off the severed arm that still held her and she clutched her neck while she had trouble breathing; black smoke sizzling out from the punctures in her neck. She didn't let that stop her, however, from opening up her hands and summoning her bow, which had also changed. One half of the bow was made with an angel wing, and the other, a demonic wing. The bow string of course, was still golden, and as she pulled back, a golden arrow appeared in place, before she shot it right at Deity's head.

In slow motion...it soared right at Deity, and he could only watch...just as the arrow pierced right into his head dead center. A shocked look froze on his face, and his head cracked more and

more from where the arrow was stuck in his head.

Unfortunately for some reason...Jill's wound around her neck wasn't regenerating. She wheezed short breaths while holding her neck.

"Jill!" Seeing that, Metal pulled Jill a small distance from Deity, standing in front of her in order to protect her from any more tricks from the vampire. *"Are you alright?"*

Jill couldn't quite answer, because she was still having trouble breathing.

The golden arrow burrowed within Deity's head, and that was the last straw that broke it, as Deity shattered, and revealed a bright glow of white light.

Gritting his teeth, Metal quickly raised his shield, which ensured that the two wouldn't be blinded; still, Metal tried looking past the shield, to see what was hidden within that light.

The bright light flashed, expanding over them, overtaking them...and while they were blinded, they could hear the fatal cry of a dragon...

Chapter 86

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-SIX

...Outside, the same happened to the Corruption Dragon as it did to Deity. Small cracks appeared on it, illuminating with that pure glow, and the rays penetrated through it little by little, while the dragon gave another fatal cry.

"What's going on?" Gale said, seeing this.

"It's Metal and Jill," Sonic answered, smiling. "...they did it."

"...they did it?" King uttered, as he wiped his brow. "...thank goodness..."

"...good going." Lock chuckled.

The pitch of the roar rose higher and higher, until finally, it exploded into a giant, brilliant flash. Waves of light shot out from it in the explosion, and everyone within the city braced themselves, as the city was propelled backwards considerably by the dragon's explosion. All of the goo deteriorated away, and the waves of light that blew out hit the dark clouds of the storm, making them shrink away. Since the dragon had been so large though, this was much more large than anyone could have imagined.

Somehow that remarkable sight finally faded away, leaving the city alone, and everyone opened their eyes to look upon a wondrous sight. First off, the large storm around them was gone, revealing a beautiful moonlit night sky, which made a fine looking silvery castle glow beautifully, despite the damages that had been done to it. Fortunately, there was no trace of black goo, dragon, or even a hint of any darkness around.

"...it's gone..." Ripper muttered.

"...then... that means that he's dead!" Newt chimed in, as he looked at the others.

"We...we gotta check to make sure!" Ani said, "and we gotta see if Metal and Jill are still there!"

"Just to be safe..." Sage hummed, as she glanced at the group. "...I'll go and scout the place first. If I can pick up Jill's and Metal's brainwaves, then we know that they're safe. Just wait for me on the edge of the city."

"Okay..." Striker said. "...please, hurry back Sage."

Nodding, Sage ran away from the group, heading outside.

"...mhrm..." Blinking, Metal opened his eyes, as he noticed that the bright light was gone. *...what... happened...?* he thought.

He saw that he was in that chapel again, and back to the way it was when Goddess had visited him; which was a much better state than what Deity transformed it into. Looking at himself, he realized that he was not radiating with a golden glow anymore. He had reverted back to normal from his Super form, and as his eyes trailed farther, he spotted each of the emeralds sitting on the ground around him. "...what do you know..." Metal hummed, as he looked at his arms. The spheres, which had been generated from his Super Mode, were also gone. "...wait..." At that point, something dawned on him, as he glanced around. "...where's Jill?"

Hearing a rather unsettling noise that sounded like short gasps, Metal whirled around. There was Jill, and she too was no longer in that sacred form of hers. Black wisps of smoke were still coming out through Jill's puncture wounds on her neck, and she was still wheezing. It just wasn't regenerating somehow...she fell against the wall and lowered on her knees in the lack of oxygen. Why wasn't it healing?

"Jill!" Seeing that made the hedgehog fearful, as he quickly ran to Jill's side, kneeling by her. "...j-just hang on; I got this." he muttered; Purity enveloped his hand, and he placed it on the puncture wounds. "Just hang on... don't give up on me! Not when we finally won!"

Purity managed to snuff out the black whips of smoke, but even as they departed and the puncture wounds healed, Jill was still having trouble breathing...

"...just try and relax, Jill..." Metal muttered in an assuring tone. "...we did it! We destroyed Novagod!"

Jill nodded, and smiled, while she tried to steady her small breath. She was so happy about defeating Deity, in fact...that tears welled up and rolled down her cheeks. It had finally been done...Deity was finally gone, and out of her life. She wouldn't have to endure any of his torture anymore...

Seeing that, Metal couldn't help but smile, as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "...at last... it's over."

Jill's head lowered, and her shoulders trembled while she tried to hold back her relieved tears.

"...what's wrong?" Metal said, as he sat down by her, simply looking at her. "...you finally beat him... there's no reason to hold it in anymore."

Since Metal permitted it, Jill broke down and sobbed into her palms silently.

Metal merely closed his eyes, as he gently patted Jill's back, for support. *...now that Johnny, Callous and Novagod are gone...* he thought. *...it's all over...*

Jill sobbed for awhile, and perhaps she would've sobbed forever for the things she had been put through, but she knew that she didn't have forever. Her weeping subsided and she wiped her eyes dry, when something came to mind. If Deity and Johnny were gone now, that meant that her mother was free. Question was, where was she? Jill opened her mouth to ask this, and ask if Metal may have caught sight of her.

...but nothing came out.

Bewildered, she tried again.

...not a sound came out of her mouth.

Blinking, Metal glanced at Jill. "...are... you alright?" he uttered.

Jill felt scared. Every time she tried to speak, there was nothing.

No voice.

Her eyes widened when she figured out what was wrong, and she touched her throat. She wasn't choking anymore...but why...?

"...don't tell me..." Metal uttered, as he looked at Jill in shock. "...that last attack from Deity... it damaged your larynx?" Saying that, he placed a hand against his head. "...which means that... you can't speak...?"

Thankful that he could figure it out without having to tell him, she nodded. But...but this was terrible. Jill felt devastated...was Deity able to inflict one last everlasting curse to her before his demise? Not being able to speak...not being able to talk to others...

...not being able to sing.

"...it might not be too late." Metal uttered, as he glanced at Jill. "I should have sufficient medical equipment back in Metropolis; if we hurry, we could reverse the damage done to it."

Jill nodded, trying to calm herself down from becoming emotional about the fact that she couldn't speak. With that, she pulled herself back onto her feet, and shortly discovered how weary she was when she stumbled on her first step.

Quickly, Metal caught her for support, as he made sure that she wouldn't collapse. "...come on..." he muttered, as he led her away from the wall, when his eyes fell on the Chaos Emeralds. "...we should bring those with us."

Jill nodded, and with a little more strength she limped to one of them. As she reached down for it though, she saw another hand touch it, and take it up. Following the Chaos Emerald with her eyes, Jill looked upon someone in utter astonishment.

Goddess offered the emerald to her to take it.

At least that answered Jill's inquiring about her mother.

Seeing that, Metal was surprised. "...Goddess." he uttered. "...let me guess; killing Novagod freed you?"

Goddess looked guilty about something, and began a confession, "Actually...I have *been* free. I have been since Jillian stabbed Johnny with her blade...and I retreated within it." Jill took the emerald from her hand with more surprise about what she told them.

"...so ever since then..." Metal hummed, as he tilted his head. "...so, what prevented you from emerging from the blade?"

"I...couldn't face Deity Novagod," Goddess murmured. "...I already knew he had been burrowed within Johnny, growing...feeding on his spiraling emotions..." Jill thought back at what her father told her, and understood her mother's reasoning.

"...but I still aided in any way I could," Goddess continued, looking down at Jill. "I poured my power into your transformed blade...and that seemed to serve some help in destroying him entirely."

"...so we owe you thanks for finally beating him." Metal presumed.

Goddess looked away from them; her face ridden with more guilt. "...but I couldn't stop him from taking her voice."

Jill's eyes widened. Did she hear that right? Her voice wasn't damaged...it was taken?

"...he took her voice?" Metal uttered. "...alright, how does that work? I should know what Purity, Corruption and Unity can do, but I've never heard about Corruption being able to steal voices before."

"...I'm not quite sure how he could have done it myself," Goddess answered. "But any medical examination will only tell you that her larynx is just fine...if you don't believe me, then you'll find out for yourself."

Gritting his teeth, Metal glanced at Jill. "...so... she's mute for life?"

Goddess looked at Jill while her devastation grew again, something that Goddess couldn't bear to look at for long. No answer came, whether she was afraid to confirm Metal's question or if she just wasn't sure.

"...there's no way for her to regain her voice?" Metal pressed, as a desperate look grew on his face.

"...not that I know of," Goddess managed to say.

It was as Jill feared; an everlasting curse. She wasn't spared from Deity's torture after all, and even if it was much more subtle than what had been done to her, it couldn't have been any more a horrible a thing to do than what he had already done to her.

"...damn it..." Metal cursed, looking down at the ground. "...and now that he's dead... we can't exactly ask him how he did it, can we?"

"I'm afraid not..." Goddess answered, and didn't expect Jill to clutch to her cloak. Jill was trying not to take it too hard, but was struggling.

There had to be a way... after all, Goddess simply said she didn't know a way to bring it back; that didn't mean there wasn't a way. Jill was trying to see the light of the situation, but her first instinct of reacting to things was always seeing the glass half-empty. She had to pull herself out of that hole...but again, she was struggling with that.

Looking at Jill, Metal could only let out a sigh, before closing his eyes. *...I doubt that Purity could help her regain her voice...* he thought.

Goddess placed a hand on Jill's head, closing her eyes. "I'm...I'm so sorry that all of this happened to you..." she muttered. Jill suddenly pushed her away, and was stunned about it too. When she looked questionably at Jill, she turned away from Goddess.

Blinking, Metal glanced at Jill. "...what..." he uttered, as he approached the ewe; while he knew that she couldn't exactly tell her what was wrong, he still felt like he needed to know.

Jill didn't react to Metal. She looked up at her mother with an

angered, hurt look. One that almost wanted to curse her mother for this...and it wasn't just for the loss of her voice. It was for everything Deity ever did to her...

...and she had the nerve to apologize for that?

To apologize for being banished from a home she thought she had, to be driven away all alone in a large world she had not been in and was unprepared to venture into? To apologize for the sickening things Deity did to her, and for creating that bitch of a doppelganger that mocked her in her misery? She was almost driven to madness, and forced to live on survival instincts for the duration of those dark few months. Even if she had a voice, there was no way to put the way she felt into words.

Looking from Jill to Goddess, Metal felt at a loss, as he rubbed the back of his head. *...it's times like this where a psychic would come in handy...* At that point, however, he blinked. *...of course... Sage! If she was here...*

"...Jillian," Goddess murmured, approaching her just for Jill to turn away from her again in refusal to respond.

Seeing that, Metal took a step towards Jill, when...

"You've certainly gone through a lot." Looking towards the entrance to the chapel, they could see Sage looking at them, her arms folded.

Goddess didn't expect to see her here, but she stood there looking at Sage in silence. Jill slowly turned from Goddess to Sage, while her angry expression died away, and she glanced at Sage in sorrow.

"...is that so..." Sage uttered, as she walked over to the group, looking at Jill. "...poor thing. Wish I could've helped you with that..."

"You can help with one thing..." Metal suggested, as he looked at Sage. "As you just proved, Jill is still capable of thought. So at the moment, you're the only one who can speak with her..."

"...actually, I think I know something else." Sage said, as she looked at Jill. "If you'd allow it... I can channel your thoughts, and let you speak through me."

Jill peered at the ground thinking about it, but probably didn't need to. There was no reason to turn it down after all, and she nodded.

"Alright..." Sage nodded, as she placed one hand on Jill's head. "For this to work, our minds must be in perfect sync... the process might hurt a little." Then, she closed her eyes, and began focusing.

Jill followed Sage's example of concentration, and admittedly she winced.

Looking between the two, Metal gritted his teeth in anticipation. *...is this going to...*

At that point, Sage's eyes whited out, as she simply stood there. *"...how could you?"* Sage suddenly screamed at Goddess, while Jill continued to look in hurtful anger at her. *"How could you just accept what he's done to me? And then apologize for it like you think he doesn't know any better?"*

Goddess was shaken by this.

Hearing that, Metal stepped back in surprise. "...Jill?" he uttered.

"You're my mother!" Sage screamed again. *"If you had the power to fight him, then why couldn't you have just come and saved me yourself? Why couldn't you have saved me from my suffering?"*

"...Jillian..." Goddess uttered. "...I didn't have the power-"

" *Sure you did!"* Sage cut her off. *"You just admitted that with your help we defeated him! Why?"* Jill turned away from her, falling to her knees as her feelings were a bit overwhelming for her. *"...why?"* Sage added.

"...Jill..." Metal uttered, as he walked towards Jill, setting a hand on her shoulder. "...there's something else I kept from you while we were training..." Then, he closed his eyes. "...Goddess... had to give herself up to Deity... to save you."

"...I already knew that," Sage answered, while Jill looked up at Metal. *"And maybe...I spoke too quickly about it, but there was no way I was going to leave any feelings unsaid...even with my voice*

gone..."

Goddess just didn't know what to say to that. She still wasn't quite ready to face Jill right now, but it was unavoidable.

Metal blinked, as he looked away from Jill; he honestly had no idea what he could tell her to calm her down.

"...all I want to know," Sage spoke, as Jill rose to her feet. *"...is how she could love such a monster, who would do those things to her only daughter?"*

Goddess was petrified she asked that. Out of all the questions Jill could've had for her, that was the last one she wanted to discuss. It was troubling enough already just to find a way to respond to the way Jill felt toward her.

"...I suppose I let my guard down...because I was desperately lonely," she finally muttered weakly. "And he was there..."

Jill looked up at her mother, weakened significantly by the yelling she had done.

"...my own life was cold and bitter," Goddess said. "...and that's information that is fairly unnecessary to tell, but he came to me and fed my need for company..."

In silence, Metal glanced at Goddess as well.

"...what you mean is justified," Goddess said. "This was not an excuse to turn away and let him do what he pleased with you...but my pride had taken a hard enough blow that while I was capable of coming to your rescue...I was still manipulated by my own feelings, and I was wary of coming to help you. After all...I am dead." Then she looked at Jill with a very apologetic face. "...I handed down my power to you...because you had the strength to stop him...not me."

Hearing that, Metal looked back at Jill, to see her reaction to all this.

Jill calmed down from her hostility toward her mother, but she still didn't feel chipper in the slightest. She would never really fully understand why Goddess felt the way she did toward Deity, and no

one would at that, but she did understand that she couldn't blame her mother for what happened, not really.

After the two shared a long, hard glance, Jill walked up to her.

And hugged her.

Seeing that, Metal closed his eyes, before looking away from the two.

"...I'm sorry," Sage muttered, and after that, Sage was released from her connection to the ewe. Blinking, the raven shook her head, placing a hand against it. "...hoo... I can never get used to that..." she muttered. "...it's quite a rush."

"...if I could properly copy that kind of data, I'd know the feeling." Metal muttered, still not looking at Jill and Goddess.

Goddess stroked her daughter's long hair while they hugged, and she tried so hard to keep them from seeing that her strength was crumbling in Jill's arms. The last time she ever held her was when she was an infant...when she had just been born...

Finally the two parted. "...I suppose you should leave," she said. "You have your friends to return to...after all."

Without saying a word, Metal began picking up the Chaos Emeralds, still not looking at the two.

"Just say the word, and I'll take you to the others." Sage said with a nod.

Goddess returned the nod to Sage, and looked down at Jill. "...I will try..." she whispered. "...to find a way." Jill at first was confused at what she meant, but it didn't take long to figure out that it was about her voice. Goddess pulled away from her, and turned toward the platform of the chapel that Deity had stood on not ten minutes ago. "...you may take them now," she murmured.

"...alright." Sage nodded, as she glanced at Metal, who had just finished collecting the Chaos Emeralds. "...let's go." Then, she picked the two up with her powers, before heading towards the exit.

"...goodbye, Goddess." Metal said with a nod to the spirit, before Sage left.

Goddess stood there silently alone.

Back in Metropolis, they all waited.

"...I hope Sage finds them," Rudy murmured uneasily.

"You and me both," Brick added.

Looking up at the sky, Wiper blinked. "...hey... I think I see them!"

"Seriously?" Queen uttered, as she glanced at Wiper.

"Ye're sure?" Whisker inquired, before looking up at the sky as well.

Sure enough, flying up in the sky was the raven, carrying Jill and Metal after her. "Found them!" she called, as she slowly descended down to the others.

Brick shoved forward through the crowd and threw her arms around Jill. While she wasn't surprised Brick would do something of the sort, she became slightly uncomfortable when she thought about how he would react when he found out.

"You did it!" cheered Striker, and Buddy spun in happy circles. "Chao, chao!"

"Congrats to the two of you," Boomer chuckled. "You really saved the world!"

"...think nothing of it." Metal muttered, just as Tails Doll fluttered onto his head.

"But Big Bro, you really helped everyone!" the plushie said in a happy tone. *"You should be proud!"*

Knuckles, Tikal, and Chaos emerged from underground, just in time to find the group surrounding the two heroes to join in. Throughout

all the congradulatory comments, no one caught on just yet that the moment wasn't as happy as it seemed to be, that is, until Brick looked at Jill and frowned. "Brownie, what's wrong?" he asked with a cocked head.

Jill could only look at Brick sadly.

Closing his eyes, Metal glanced away from the group.

"...what's wrong?" Tails Doll uttered, as he looked at Jill. *"...did... something happen?"*

Jill's eyes fell uncomfortably to the ground, leaving Brick somewhat baffled and a little concerned. "...Brownie, why aren't you saying anything?" he asked; key words that triggered Jill to bury her face in his shoulder and break down yet again. Holding her, he looked to Metal for an answer.

"...she..." Metal uttered, without looking at Brick. "...can't speak. Before Deity was finished off, he... stole her voice."

Instantly, everything fell to silence, as the group could only look at Metal in disbelief.

"...he did that huh?" Sonic muttered, closing his eyes with a grave expression on him. Even if it didn't look it, or maybe it did, he felt really sorry for her.

"...so..." Jack uttered, as he looked at Jill in disbelief. "...she... can't talk? At all?"

"...unless we find a way to return her voice... no." Metal muttered, still not looking at the group.

"...you serious?" Gale spoke. No matter how many times they replayed that truth in their heads, they still didn't get over their disbelief of the fact Jill couldn't speak.

"Brownie..." Brick felt the same kind of despair she did. He wouldn't get to hear that melodious giggle of hers...that soft, comforting voice he looked forward to hearing...gone.

"...excuse me." Metal muttered, before pushing through the group, headed towards the underground room.

Sonic watched Metal leave, and decided to follow him to make sure he was alright; he clearly wasn't from what he observed, and after the episode when Jill died, one couldn't be too careful.

When Sonic caught up with him underground, he found that Metal was simply placing the Chaos Emeralds back on the pedestals, though with a thoughtful and heavy expression on his face.

Sonic didn't say anything just yet. He observed Metal while quietly thinking how Jill really had an affect on him. It was pretty incredible for Metal to be able to feel, and to feel for someone was something else. Eggman's technology could never hope to capture anything like that...which was why it was still a little surprising for even Sonic every now and then to think about how one of Eggman's machines grew to care about that girl.

"...I shouldn't have been so defensive..." Metal muttered, once he placed the last emerald in place. "...if I had only been quicker... Deity wouldn't have gotten hold of her..."

"Whoa, hey, don't go blaming it on yourself," Sonic blurted quickly, since Metal being so guilty was a drag. "There was no way you would've known he was gonna do something like that." Scratch that. Of course Metal would have known Deity would drop to a lower level to get back at Jill, but...just not like this.

"...still... I had every opportunity to go right at him and finish him on my own..." Metal muttered. "...yet... somehow, I wanted her to be the one to finish that bastard..."

"...maybe because it felt right," Sonic said. "After what he did to her, she needed to do it..."

"...true..." Metal uttered, still not looking at Sonic. "...after all, she had genuine reasons for wanting him dead... but my reasons were nothing short of selfish..."

"...what were your reasons?" Sonic asked, and why in the world did

he ask that question? Who knew...

"...you, of all people, should know that..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...because he killed you, Fang and Knuckles before I could... that was my reason."

"Oh..." Sonic had almost forgotten about that. All this talk felt like he was getting nowhere, so Sonic asked him directly, "you gonna be okay?"

"...I'm not sure." Metal replied, as he closed his eyes. "...when I was awoken, and got another chance at world conquest... I never expected any of this to happen..."

"I think nobody did," Sonic said. Then he let out a sigh, "Well, dictator, now that the vampire's dealt with, what are your plans?"

"...I don't know." Metal muttered. "Apart from Tails Doll and me, every single robot Eggman built that my army consisted of has been demolished, thanks to the Overlord blasting against the dragon..."

"Well, there's Omega, but you know..." Sonic murmured at the side. Curiosity pestered him to ask more questions. "What about Jill and her friends? You gonna leave them to figure out what you're going to do?"

"...I don't do well in crowds." Metal replied.

"Makes sense," Sonic answered.

"...besides... I've made a decision." Metal continued, as he finally glanced at Sonic. "...even if I may be friendly towards Jill and her comrades... I'm still Metal Sonic, and the world is going to recognize me as nothing but Metal Sonic."

"Well I don't know about that," Sonic said. "I mean with the way you look now...you could be invisible to the public."

"I don't need a face to be recognized." Metal retorted. "And even if I can't turn back into my Neo form, I still have the power to copy myself; and as you might have noticed, the clones still retain the Neo form."

"Well, maybe you're right about that," Sonic murmured. "...but still, take away the cloak and the shoulder pads...who knows, you might just pass off as someone entirely different. If people can mistake me for Shadow, they can see you as someone else..." Then he turned away from the other hedgehog and shrugged. "I don't know. It was just a thought, y' know."

"...I'm no hero, Sonic." Metal eventually said. "...I might have done this for the better of the world... but I could never actually take credit for it."

Sonic fell silent. He tried to think of something to say, a way to convince Metal that maybe there's a second chance for something else, but nothing came to mind. He spotted the Master Emerald sitting there, which reminded him. "...guess we'd better take the Master Emerald back to Angel Island," he said. When he started floating away, he stopped by the doorway of the room. "...well, whatever you think of doing Metal, if it means you're leaving, then...Jill deserves to know." and he was gone through the tunnels.

That left Metal on his own, eventually sinking to his knees, looking down at the ground. *...she... needs to know...* he thought, closing his eyes.

Up topside, the others had remained quiet.

Some maybe took the time to enjoy the solitude, since Deity was finally defeated and they could rest now. Others possibly dwelled on the idea that Jill couldn't possibly be able to speak again, and they looked at her in sympathy, while she looked out into the night sky at the moon. They didn't say anything, but either looked elsewhere or at her in utter silence, afraid that the mood could be shattered if just one of them uttered a single sound.

It was pretty tragic for Jill to accept that Deity had inflicted such a curse on her, but like all the tragedies that happened to her, she would work her way through this one. While staring at that moon in the night sky, her sorrow had settled down inside her, and she was starting to feel something else.

It was something like content.

Even with what he did to her, Deity Novagod was no more. Johnny was gone along with him, and she wondered to herself what Callous was going to do. Jill knew that Callous still existed in her subconscious, and probably would come again to possess her if given the opportunity. Then a small smile crossed her face. Imagine how Callous would act if she couldn't speak either. I suppose that spares her friends of bitter, hurtful cursing or lies.

...you're alright? Jill would hear a voice in her head say; namely, Sage's, even though the raven was looking elsewhere at the moment.

...I'm not sure, Jill answered. Although hearing Sage speak to her was enough to lighten her up...only a little. At least she wasn't cut off from complete communication from everyone. *...I guess all I can say is that I'm getting used to it,* she thought.

...don't let it get you down. Sage replied.

...I'll try not to, Jill looked back at the place where that castle used to be. Now it was gone; probably it had slipped away from them when they weren't paying attention. They were just in the night sky, sailing across the sea of clouds like a massive cruise ship. Imagining that, Jill relaxed some more.

...so, now that Novagod's gone... what do you plan on doing? Sage inquired.

...figure out how to get Jack, Striker, and Milo back home to the Nameless Zone, Jill decided. *After all...thats what we were doing before this whole thing started...and I guess we have to figure out how to get Silver back to his original time too.*

...so you're sending them away...? Sage hummed. *...hm. I couldn't imagine how the day would be without them hanging around...*

I guess I couldn't either, Jill watched one of the clouds pass by. *...but they have families that are wondering where they are...*

...hm. I am gonna miss them. Sage mused, as she glanced up at the sky.

Me too, Jill thought.

The groups were actually separated. The spirits, along with Shadow, had all gathered at the rooftop of a building, all of them looking back and forth between the group gathered near Jill down below.

"...there's got to be something that can be done," Amy murmured, feeling helpless when she looked at Jill. Since they were too distant, their voices could go unheard so it wouldn't disrupt them.

"...but just what?" Vector muttered. "It's not like we can just fade into the aether and grab her voice from whatever disembodied spirit Deity turned into after she and Metal shanked him..."

"...but we can't just sit here and do nothing." Espio muttered.

Sonic popped up from the building and joined them. "Well, we're heading to Angel Island," he said.

"How's Metal taking this?" Rouge asked, throwing Sonic a curious look over her shoulder.

"Metal?" Sonic sighed again. "...well, no doubt that this hurt him pretty bad. He was beating up himself for not being quick enough to stop Deity from taking her voice..."

"...sheesh... poor guy." Mighty muttered, as he folded his arms. "It's still hard to believe that he turned into that, though..."

"...Metal being human... and Jill losing her voice..." Shadow muttered, as he was looking away from the group, simply looking out over the sky. "...changes no one could've seen coming..."

"No kidding," Desperado remarked.

Knuckles spotted something approaching them from the air, which he couldn't quite make out in the dark until they landed on the building with all of the spirits on it. Charmy and Tails were looking at all of them, and they had their own awkward silence overtake them.

"...um... like, hi?" Bliss said, waving at the two with a nervous chuckle.

"...hi," Charmy regarded the return greeting to Bliss while looking mostly at the rest of his former Chaotix group.

Sonic alternated his eyes between the two of them, but they stared longer at Tails. "...hey buddy," he started, trying to smile.

"...hello, Sonic..." Tails said with a mild nod regarded to Sonic; a small smile crawling across his lips, albeit slowly.

The Chaotix glanced back at Charmy as well, each of them smiling a bit awkwardly.

Charmy smiled back, but then his eyes fell to the ground, and closed. "...now I sort of wish Cream had come..." he muttered.

"...indeed..." Tails muttered, as his eyes fell too.

"...u-um..." Bliss uttered, as she looked at everyone. "...like, d-don't look so down!" she tried, though with relatively little success.

"...yeah," Sonic agreed with Bliss, trying to help out her cause. "I understand it's probably really hard...and a little werid...to see us right now, but hey..."

Amy walked over and put a hand on Tails' arm, hoping that would comfort him. "We've all been through a lot...but the good news is that its all over."

"...I suppose..." Tails nodded, looking at Amy with a smile.

"...now, there's nothing that can threaten the world..." Shadow mused.

Charmy looked over at the others down below. "...but what to do about that," he murmured.

"...we're... still thinking about that." Sprinter muttered, snapping his fingers.

"...I'm a bit curious..." Mighty muttered, as he rubbed his chin. "...Jill got her powers back because Deity was on the brink of returning, right? Now that he's dead... do you think she'll keep them?"

That was something to think about. They all looked at Jill while pondering that, and then they all saw the kids walking toward her; Ani, Milo, Striker, and Jack.

"Jill?" Jill turned and looked down at Milo, who took her hand. "...I'm sorry that you lost your voice," he said, looking up at her with those sad little eyes, "but I'm glad that you're okay."

"Yeah," Ani threw in. "We're really happy that you came back this time...that you aren't...you know," and she shuffled her feet nervously. She didn't exactly want to think about Jill having died this morning, and since she was reborn...well, no reason to consider that she died, right?

This effort to make Jill feel better worked slightly, since she smiled at them. They were right. It was better that she came back to her friends with no voice, than having been killed with no way to see them again. She ruffled Milo's furry head affectionately, showing her appreciation for what they said.

Seeing Jill like that, Jack could only scratch the back of his head a bit awkwardly; he was happy to see her alright, even without her voice, but he wasn't sure about what to say.

"...so, are you ready to join the others, Jill?" Striker asked curiously. Buddy flew up to her, and Jill held him in her arms. "Chao chao..." the little chao muttered.

Jill looked at Striker, and gave him a shake of her head. She wasn't quite ready yet, but her gaze turned to the tallest tower in Metropolis, thinking that Metal might be up there. She wondered what he was doing now...if he was okay...

"...Big Bro isn't there." At that point, Tails Doll fluttered down on Jill's shoulder. *"He went underground to place the Chaos Emeralds on the pedestals, to power the city up again."*

Jill looked at Tails Doll and gave him a nod of thanks for letting her know that. Handing Buddy back to Striker, she started walking away to where the entrance of the underground was. Once she had gone down the stairs into the underground, upon entering the power

chamber, she saw Metal simply standing in front of the Master Emerald, looking at it. She clearly couldn't say anything to catch his attention, but even if she still had her voice, she would've remained silent not knowing what to say. Metal would likely already know she was there anyway...

"...Jill." Metal uttered, without looking at the ewe. "...I... need to tell you something."

She moved away from the doorway, and closer to Metal, ready to listen to what he had to say.

"...we've... certainly been through a lot this past week..." Metal began, as he placed a hand on the Master Emerald. "...and with Novagod gone... you should just about be ready to take a well-deserved rest. But..." Then, he finally glanced at Jill. "...I can't stay with you."

Jill bit her lip. She considered that Metal would have to leave. There was no real reason for him to stay after all, and it could very well be that he had to figure out on his own what to do...

...but even then, she didn't want him to go.

Looking away from Jill, Metal sighed. "...I know that it's hard... and I know that you wanted to help me find a different purpose... but that's my problem. I do not wish to burden you any further..."

Jill looked at him, wondering how he could say that. Burden her further? Sure, it was truly up to him, but that didn't mean...it was a burden to her. She touched his arm softly, wishing right now that she could tell him that.

"...this doesn't mean that we'll sever our ties." Metal muttered, still not looking at her. "But..." He hesitated; not entirely sure how to say what he wanted to say.

Jill waited for him to say what he wanted to. That was all she could do...

"...I... know that you wanted me to change for the better... and to tell you the truth... I did, I suppose..." Metal muttered, as he closed his

eyes. "...but I'm not sure if I really can do that. Even though I do not look like Neo Metal Sonic anymore..."

Her hand moved up his arm to his shoulder in her insecurity. Did it really have to be this way? It wouldn't have mattered to her what he looked like...she just...didn't want him to leave.

"...I'm sorry..." Metal muttered. "...I'm making you worry for me... aren't I?"

Jill wasn't sure if Metal could she, but she nodded a little.

"...hm." Metal hummed. "...I... do wish that I could hear your opinion on this, but..."

Jill let out a deep, depressed sigh, and looked up at the Master Emerald; her hand still on his shoulder.

Metal, too, sighed, as he still held his hand on the Master Emerald.

Staring at that shining rock was hardly enough to satisfy the conversation, and Jill turned to Metal. If this was goodbye...no, it couldn't be goodbye. Even if they would seperate, there would be a time they'd see each other again. She counted on it...

Goodbye or not, she had to show it somehow. She just wondered...if it would be too awkward to do what she wanted to do. Then she decided she shouldn't waste her time on thinking about it, leaning in and giving him...

...a small kiss on the cheek.

It didn't mean anything other than grateful appreciation for everything he had done...and with that, she turned and started walking away.

Blinking, Metal placed a hand against his cheek, a baffled expression appearing on his face. *...Jill...* he thought, before closing his eyes, gritting his teeth as well. *...I'm sorry...*

Jill hesitated leaving out the doorway. She leaned on its edge with a hand, and tried to wipe away any tears that wanted to push through

to her eyes. She had to be strong...

When she got herself together again, she finally ventured out into the tunnel.

Looking back, Metal caught a glimpse of Jill leaving, before he looked away. Closing his eyes, he sat down by the Master Emerald, his head hanging low.

Jill emerged from the underground passageway, back into the city floating in the night sky, and looked toward the group of characters standing in the distance, seeing them as they grew to converse among themselves...

"This was a...big...day," Cal murmured.

"...I'll say." Natal nodded, as she rubbed the back of her head.

"...but at least... now it's over, y'know?" Newt said with a sigh of relief.

"...yeah," Boomer muttered. Then she glanced at Cal, determining whether or not she was still sore at Cal. When Cal noticed her looking at him, her face scrunched to a glare. Yeah, she still had a grudge against him, and there probably was no way she would trust him again anytime soon...but she didn't feel like fighting with him right now.

Cal rolled his eyes, "Still mad at me I see," he grumbled.

"...for now," Boomer added.

"...well, seeing as both of you are considered GUN Agents, now..." Wiper mused, as he glanced at the two of them. "...I do hope that you can put grudges aside."

"...eh, time will tell," Cal said with a shrug. It was the most honest answer he could give.

"So," Boomer looked suspiciously between him and Natal. "...what's up with the two of you anyway?"

Cal's eyes widened, turning beat red. He didn't want to answer THAT question!

"...we'll answer if you say what's up between you and Newt." Natal said with a clever smirk, as she glanced at Boomer.

Hearing that question, Newt became just as red as Cal was.

Boomer shared the same smirk as Natal, "Nice comeback." Then she looked at the boys and chuckled, "You know...I think what's happened with me and Newt isn't much different than you and Cal."

"...seems like it." Natal nodded, as she glanced at the boys as well, before giggling.

Cal scowled as he turned even redder, since he wasn't amused with the girls laughing at them. "It's not funny..." he grumbled.

"Yes it is," Boomer laughed. "It's funny as hell."

"You just got to look at it in a humorous light." Natal giggled, as she glanced at Newt. "Isn't that right?"

"Hm?" Blinking, Newt glanced at Natal, before looking away with a sheepish smile. "...y-yeah, I guess, y'know..."

At least this sort of thing got smiles out of the others around them. Finally...something light-hearted enough to rise everyone out of such a depression.

"You know," Hunter murmured, smirking at an entertaining thought. "...I think it'd be REALLY funny if King ever found anyone..."

"What, and risk having smaller Kings running around everywhere?" Queen chuckled. "Fat chance."

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?" King said, as he glanced at Queen with a raised eyebrow; something that lightened the mood further.

"Well, it's like Sage said," Boomer added. "Wouldn't want another repeat with Ani and any kid of King's, right?"

Hunter burst out laughing. "Sage said that?"

"She said WHAT?" King sputtered, as he glanced at the raven, who was looking up at the sky with an oblivious expression.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about..." Sage chuckled in a sing-song tone.

"What about me and a kid of King's?" Ani muttered, walking into the conversation just there, and that unleashed a roar of laughter from everyone. Ani looked at all of them nervously. "What? What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing..." Miser managed to say through sputters of laughter.

"Well King, now that I think about it...what do you plan to do for your 'warrior nation' you've talked about?" Boomer asked curiously, once the laughter died down.

"Ah, that..." King muttered, as he rubbed the back of his head. "...well, with all that's happened... I guess I oughta put more planning into it, before I go ahead and found it. Better to have the whole thing structured first, right?"

"You know...if the Commander of GUN approves...you guys might just be able to set up on Prison Island," Boomer murmured thoughtfully, perking Hunter's attention. "As far as I'm concerned, GUN never really bothered to revive it and use it again. It should be open game..."

"...true..." King hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...but how'd we get people to come there? We'd need to build a bridge..." Then, he glanced at Queen. "You know, we could build a bridge leading to there!"

"All by ourselves? That'd take weeks." Queen noted.

"Still, couldn't hurt to try! Kekekekekekeke!" Ripper laughed.

"A bridge is a stretch, but there could be a ship that can go back and forth; Prison Island has a harbor after all," Cal threw in, although he

was confused why he was adding ideas.

"But we should make sure to have someone to check up on who boards the ship, then; it could be someone with ill intentions towards making the nation in the first place." Sage noted.

"...does anyone have a pen and paper? I need to write all this down!" King called, as he looked around at the group.

Cal popped open a compartment in his upper arm, and pulled out a pen. "Don't know why, but I had this," Cal replied, offering the pen to King. "I don't have any paper though."

"...well, does anyone have any paper, then?" King inquired, as he took the pen from Cal.

Boomer felt something in her back pocket to her surprise, and she pulled it out to find a folded up paper. Opening it, she saw that it was nothing more than a grocery list. "Huh, what do you know..." she murmured, handing it over. "Guess you can use the blank side on that."

"Alright..." Nodding, King took the slip of paper, before glancing at the others. "Let's start thinkin' up ideas for Safe Haven!"

Further from the group, Lock stood on his own, merely glancing at the antics over there. "...hm." he hummed, before looking up at the sky. He heard some footsteps come up to him, and Jill was there, standing next to him with a look up at him.

Glancing at Jill, Lock regarded a slight nod at her. "...hi." he said.

Jill returned the nod, and then she looked out at the night sky.

"...soothing, isn't it?" Lock hummed, as he glanced up at the sky again. "After such a conflict ending... it's always gratifying to simply look up at the starry night sky."

Jill nodded in agreement. After all, looking at this very sky was what put her at peace earlier, keeping her from breaking apart, and now it was helping her calm from the hard moment she had with Metal.

"...I'm sorry about your voice." Lock eventually said, as he pulled the brim of his hat further over his eyes. "If there's any way I can help you regarding anything, don't hesitate to let me know."

Jill gave Lock one last nod in appreciation.

"So that's Nack's grandson, huh?" Sonic said, looking out at the two of them standing alone, away from the group of others. "Gee, I never would have guessed."

"Yeah; he doesn't act like his grandpa, or nothin'..." Vector hummed.

"...do you guys think he figured out that Deity killed Fang back then?" Mighty inquired, as he glanced at the group.

"Can't say for sure," Charmy said. "I think he knew his grandfather was murdered, but it probably wasn't until recently that he found out it was Deity." A shuddering thought it was...since it reminded him too well of the case. Moving aside to other matters, he continued, "Jet on the other hand..."

"Yeah, I know, his grandchildren are chips off the old block," Rouge said. "...and a very old block indeed."

"I didn't even know that he managed to start a family..." Espio hummed. "...makes me wonder how Wave and Storm ended up..."

Amy sighed as she pressed her hands together thoughtfully. "If only we had children Sonic..."

Sonic jumped uneasily at that, "Whoa, hey...I don't think I'd want to think about that..."

Hearing that, Shadow couldn't help but let out a small chuckle.

Charmy glanced at Shadow. "I have to ask. Shouldn't it be a good time to let Proxy have control over his body again?"

"...I suppose..." Shadow nodded, as he glanced at the others. "...though, I'll need Milo's help to leave Proxy's body, and... I think he needs a break after today's events."

"We all do..." Vector muttered.

Suddenly, the city was shaken violently, cutting off all conversation that was going on completely.

"Holy crap!" Brick screamed. It felt like something hit the city, but what?

"It's an earthquake!" Lin yelled, as she clung to Flamenco desperately. "Man the lifeboats!"

"Neither o' them applies in our current situation, lass! We`re in th' sky!" Whisker yelled in response to that.

"...but... what hit us?" Sage uttered, glancing around her.

A chunk of a building was suddenly blown off with the chunks of building flying at the group, and the streets were stamped with massive craters. It was shaking the entire city with deafening, booming stomps, and it let out a roar. Everyone looked around in panic, but saw nothing. It was as if this mysterious, fearsome creature was entirely invisible to their own eyes.

Jill felt an incredible force hit her so hard it made her fly and hit the wall of a building in agony.

"BROWNIE!" Brick uttered in fear. Before he could make it to her though, the same force knocked Brick away, and the hit was so hard that he was knocked out.

"BRICK!" All of the kids screamed, running to him, but they too were hit with this tremendous, powerful, scary force. Each of them were knocked out by the sheer impact as well; Striker, Jack, Milo, Ani, Buddy, and Rudy, all of them collapsed next to Brick unconsciously.

"What in the world?" King yelled, as he got on his feet. "What the hell's happening?"

"Trouble, that's what!" Sage said, as she quickly used her powers to gather the unconscious children, along with Brick and Jill, to her, before erecting a psychic barrier around her. "Everyone, huddle up! I'll keep whatever that is out of here!"

Soon, everyone quickly gathered around Sage, safely protected within the confines of her psychic barrier... all save for Tails Doll, who quickly flew down underground to where Metal was.

More buildings were spontaneously destroyed, and chunks of cement flew everywhere, while each of the buildings began collapsing. There was that deathly roar again, and one building toppled into another, and another, becoming some sort of domino effect.

"What could be causing all this?" uttered Gale, shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"We don't know!" Hunter growled, clenching his teeth.

"But we gotta think!" King said. "I mean, Johnny's gone, Deity's gone... so who the hell could be left to want to kill us?"

At that point, emerging from the underground were both Metal and Tails Doll, the former seeing the destruction of Metropolis with a shocked expression. "...what..." he uttered.

"Senorita," Flamenco uttered, trying to shake Jill out of her pain-induced coma. "You have to wake now! Something is-" and he stopped altogether when her eyes popped open...

...noticing that they were red.

Another roar ensued and more buildings were suddenly broken down, drawing Jill's eye. To all of them, whatever was causing this was totally invisible, even to Sonic and his friends.

But Jill saw it...and she would have been speechless if she had her voice anyway.

It was a creature far beyond the size of comprehension, tearing the city apart in a rage, but it wasn't unfamiliar. Those slick, black scales...those massive, demonic wings...and when the creature turned, it shot a sharp glare back at her with piercing red eyes and hissed another roar out of its sharp beak.

It was the Corruption Dragon.

Chapter 87

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-SEVEN

But again, the others could not see it; except maybe Sage, who might catch a glimpse of the image in Jill's mind.

"What's wrong Jill?" Cal uttered; for his own senses were tingling like crazy, trying to warn him of the danger before them.

"...there's something attacking the place!" Sage quickly said, looking where Jill looked. "And if she's not mistaken... it's that dragon again!"

Even though he couldn't see it, Metal gritted his teeth, as he knew something was going on. "...there's no way that I'll let whatever is attacking us to destroy my city!" he snarled, before rushing back down underground.

"What?" Boomer blurted. "You mean...it's Deity?"

Jill grit her teeth. No...no this wasn't right! She and Metal defeated this beast! He wasn't supposed to come back this time! He wasn't! She felt such an overwhelming anger, frustration, and hatred...that damn vampire was supposed to be dead and stay dead! She couldn't control herself any longer as she rushed at the edge of Sage's psychic barrier and pounded against it harshly, while the dragon continued to defile the city.

"Jill?" Cal certainly didn't expect that behavior out of Jill.

"Jill, calm down!" Sage called, as she quickly looked towards her. *...don't tell me that you're going to try and fight that monster on your own?* she thought, hoping to get contact with the ewe.

Jill seemingly ignored him, and her blows to the psychic barrier were getting stronger and more rough; now she even brought Unity into the mix and she poured all her power into those punches. She was locked in full warrior mode for sure...

The dragon continued its rampage, chomping right into a building and spitting its contents out into the street, scarring up the road even more.

At that point, a golden beam shot narrowly above the dragon's back, as someone flew out from the underground; Metal Sonic, who had turned Super. *"...alright, show yourself!"* he called, glaring at where he assumed the beast to be. *"If you do, I might be nice and kill you quickly!"*

No! Metal shouldn't fight the beast! He couldn't even see where it was! Desperation added to Jill's fury and she refused to let up as she attacked Sage's barrier. *Let me out!* she screamed in her mind. *LET ME OUT!*

The dragon picked up its large tail, and whacked Metal into another building since the hedgehog couldn't see it coming. However, Metal wasn't going to be stopped by that, as he blasted out from the building, before letting one of his spheres expand into a massive circular saw-blade, which was furiously cutting away at the city, and hopefully, the dragon.

Seeing Jill attack the barrier like that, Sage gritted her teeth. *...Jill! Listen to me!* she practically yelled in her mind. *You can't attack it if you're that enraged! You're going to lose focus, and pay drastically for it! So if you want out, calm down!*

I can't! I JUST CAN'T! Jill just kept punching the barrier, too stubborn right now to listen to her.

The saw blade just passed right through the Corruption Dragon without making a cut or anything; like it was some sort of optical illusion and it didn't really exist. It turned a claw at Metal and tried to take a swipe out of annoyance. Gritting his teeth, Metal flew upwards, thankfully before the claw would hit him. *...where the hell is that beast?*

Seeing Jill act like that, Sage closed her eyes. *...just be careful.* Then, the psychic barrier wavered, enough for Jill to be able to rush out and fight the dragon.

And boy did she rush out, running with all the energy pumped inside of her due to her anger. Coming in on one of the dragon's clawed feet, she threw a powerful punch into its ankle, and the Unity in the punch rippled throughout its entire body...

...the ripples each making the Dragon visible to all of them...

When the ripples were gone and the Dragon was invisible again, it roared with the pain surging through its foot. It turned its attention to Jill, whipping her with its massive tail right into another building.

"No!" Hunter uttered. Then Jill leaped out of the hole to his amazement, "...eh?"

Jill ran right back for the dragon again with unwavering endurance. The Dragon swept its large tail at her again, but she knew better this time, hopping into a building just in time to avoid it; and it tore down another building instead. With the tail stuck in the building, Jill popped out of hiding and climbed onto the tail, quickly running up it's back. Seeing how Jill ran up the back of the invisible dragon, Metal's eyes narrowed. *"...there it is!"* With a yell, Metal flew down towards the dragon, before his spheres turned into a golden sword and shield, and he slashed at the dragon where he presumed it was.

Metal hit the Dragon at the side, and it squirmed as it roared, but this didn't knock Jill off her balance one bit. She hopped over the joints in the roots of the wings, and quickly reached the Dragon's head where she jumped high, and delivered a mighty, Unity-augmented drop kick onto its noggin. It was so powerful that it actually knocked its head into the ground, and Jill landed onto her feet next to it.

While they still couldn't see the Dragon, they could see the incredible crater that was created once Jill landed onto her feet, and seeing that, most of their eyes widened in amazement.

"...whoa..." King uttered in awe.

"...Damn," Cal uttered.

Seeing the crater, Metal tightened the grip on his sword, and he rocketed right down towards the crater, before stabbing the sword

right into the beast's back, actually expanding the crater even further beneath the dragon. The Dragon shrieked, and jumped right up to its feet. Then it tore off another building with its jaws, and hurled it toward Metal. Also, it threw another building into pieces, having the ruins slide onto Jill and totally bury her.

However, Metal was quicker, slicing the incoming building in half, and he shot toward where he thought the head was, before delivering several slashes at it, intending to weaken it.

Looking towards the rubble where Jill was lying under, Sage gritted her teeth. "...we got to help them." she muttered. "We can't just stand around and do nothing."

"How can we fight something that we can't see though?" Boomer called out, over the painful roars of the Dragon that came from Metal's attacks. "Did you see what it did to the poor kids?"

"What, you're not feeling sorry for Brick?" Cal asked.

"Brick is accident prone on a daily basis," Boomer remarked.

"...true," Cal admitted.

The Dragon managed to pull away from Metal's strikes and flap its gigantic wings. Due to its size, one flap created a gusty windtunnel akin to a tornado, powerful enough to blow Metal backwards as it took to the air.

Even so, the metallix-hedgehog glared up at where he presumed the dragon was, before flying up towards it, relentlessly attacking it.

Looking towards the rubble pile, Lock's eyes narrowed. "...I'm not going to stand by and do nothing." he muttered, suddenly drawing a pistol to shoot Sage's foot. As the raven cried out in pain, the bounty hunter took her loss of focus to his advantage, running towards the rubble pile.

"...kkh..." Sage glared towards Lock. "...he could have just asked for me to lower the damn field!"

Lock got there just in time for Jill to burst right out of the rubble,

showing no sign of fatigue even if she looked all scraped up. She looked up at the sky, where she could barely make out the battle between Metal and the Dragon. It was so much bigger than him, and he couldn't see it...but he still fought it; and while some of his slashes made a hit on that Dragon, it had plenty of room in the air to manuever around him, and manipulate where the Super Hedge went just by air current.

Once Jill regenerated from the scrapes on her, she spied a path upwards made completely from the ruins of the buildings, and not minding Lock there at all, she hopped to it, running up the ruins.

Seeing that, Lock ran up after Jill, hoisting his rifle off his back.

"...we can't let them go on their own..." Miser muttered, as she watched this. "...I'll head off and help them. Anyone else feel like coming?"

"I'm coming," Cal said, drawing out his katanas.

"Me too," Boomer threw in, pulling her gun out.

"You guys go on; I'm staying with Brick and the kids to make sure they're okay," Hunter said.

"I will also stay," Flamenco added in. "It is not smart to fight something I cannot see."

"Count us in!" Newt said, as he and Natal stepped up, with Wiper joining them shortly.

"Kekekeke! Me too!" Ripper called, walking up to the group.

"...you guys are gonna need some heavy help; so I'm comin', too!" King said, as he walked up to Miser as well.

"You guys are gonna be alright?" Lin said with some worry.

"We'll help Jill in whatever way we can." Miser said, as she gave King a confident smile. "Now is not the time to falter."

"You bet." King nodded, before looking at Sage. "Let us out!"

"...then be careful!" Sage said, just as she lifted the barrier, letting Miser, King, Wiper, Newt, Natal, Boomer, Cal and Ripper run out after Jill and Lock.

As all of them were making their way up to the top of a lucky building that had not been destroyed, Jill looked up. The Dragon had decided to leave Metal to guessing games and dove right back down at the city. It's impact when it landed not only made a tremendous quake, but it tilted the entire city one way, making those in the city slide down the road, or slip off the pathway up the ruined slope; just for another to catch them and keep from falling off.

Gritting his teeth, Lock looked towards where he assumed that the dragon had landed. "...son of a..." he muttered, lining up a shot with his rifle. Pulling the trigger, he fired several explosive bursts of energy from it, which flew towards where the dragon was supposed to be.

"Let's get it!" Miser called, just as she followed Lock's example, firing her rail-gun where he was firing.

"It's going down!" King proclaimed, with whiskers electrically sparking. Then he launched some lighting at where the others aimed.

Looking down, Metal saw where they all were firing. *...what are they...* he thought.

Boomer fired her weapon as well, shooting where the other two were aiming at. The fire from those three called the Dragon's attention, and it roared at them in anger; whether it was hurt or it was annoyed was unknown. It pulled its tail around and sliced through the middle of the building they all stood on, hoping to make them fall with the crumbling building. However, in spite of that, the three didn't stop firing at the dragon, and soon, Newt joined in as well, firing his own weapon at where he supposed the dragon was. "You go and try to attack it directly; we'll cover it from here." Lock said, shooting Jill, Wiper, Cal, Natal and Ripper a glance.

"...you'll be alright?" Wiper inquired, though Lock's only response was a mild nod. "...just don't die on us." he eventually said, before

he ran ahead of the group, Ripper and Natal following the cobra.

"Better show us where it is," Cal told Jill, following her as she ran. To what she saw, they were running carefully around the piles of building until they made it underneath its belly, and she pointed up at it for them. Cal's jet-pack kicked on and he flew forward, taking a slash at its belly. The Dragon responded with a painful roar, confirming that Cal had indeed struck it. Nodding, Wiper quickly ran to where he presumed the dragon's leg was and stabbed his hands into it. When they were stuck, that was enough for him to start climbing up the leg. Ripper and Natal, on the other hand, followed Cal's example, jumping up to where the dragon's belly was, both of them madly slicing at it. And as this went on, the gunmen were still firing at the dragon without delay.

Seeing this, Metal gritted his teeth. *"...time to help them, it seems."* he muttered, diving down towards the dragon, delivering a stab from his sword directly onto the beast's back, even though he couldn't see where he attacked.

All these attacks would seem like a lot to the dragon, but as Jill observed...it didn't look like it was growing tired; only just angrier, continuing to roar at the attacks. But how can that be? And just how did this thing come back in the first place anyway? She was sure that she and Metal beat him...even killed him.

The Dragon threw its tail again into another building to fling the chucks at the others. It missed Lock, Miser, King, and Newt, but one small chuck fell just right in order to strike Boomer over the head. Uttering a groan of pain, the hit had been hard enough that it knocked her out, making her collapse.

Seeing Boomer knocked out, Newt instantly stopped firing to rush to her side. "Boomer! Damn it... she's out cold!"

Lock scoffed, as he gave Miser a nod. "We'll need to go further towards it." he said, before he and the rhino ran towards where the dragon was.

Feeling Wiper climbing its leg, it tried to shake the cobra off. Wiper managed to keep himself stuck to the dragon, as he persisted in

climbing it. The Dragon had too many targets to worry about, so in order to blow all of them away, it generated another powerful air current with the flapping of its wings. As the group shielded themselves, some of them could only look up as they saw Wiper being carried up into the sky by this invisible force.

"...damn it!" King cursed, as electricity crackled from his fur. "How is it that we can't see the damn thing?"

"...there must be some way..." Miser muttered, as she and Lock alternated shots at it, taking care not to aim at Wiper.

"...kekekeke..." Ripper growled, as he brandished his blades. "...how to kill it..."

But that's the thing. It was already killed before... Jill was trying so hard to figure out what was going on; trying to figure out if they could really stop this thing. It only kept destroying more and more of Metropolis... and still, everyone who was fighting it were giving it their all, despite not even knowing whether or not their attacks connected to it.

Back with the spirits, Sprinter's eyes suddenly widened. "...I sense it!" he uttered.

"You sense what?" Desperado asked.

"...that monster that they're fighting..." Sprinter uttered, as he stood up. "...I can sense something about it... too familiar..." Then, he glanced at the group of spirits. "It's another spirit."

"What?" Bliss uttered. "Another spirit? Like, did Prowler get back, or something?"

"No; Prowler is far too weak a spirit to cause damage of this magnitude." Sprinter muttered, as he glared back at the destruction taking place. "...this spirit is vile and malicious... and powerful."

"...you think...it's..." Amy had a hard time putting it into words, but Knuckles somehow read her mind.

"...that vampire?" Knuckles supposed in disbelief.

"...hmph..." Sprinter hummed. "...I would say that it's an accurate guess."

"Sheesh, and, like, I thought that Johnny was hard to kill!" Bliss huffed.

"Well, what do we do?" Vector shot in, as he looked at the group. "If they can't see it, there's no way that they're gonna be able to kill it!"

"Jill is the only one who seems to be able to see it," Desperado said. "But even her attacks aren't making a dent in that thing."

Sonic looked to Tails on this one. "Well old buddy...you got anything in mind?" he asked.

"...it's hard to think of something on the spot..." Tails muttered, as he glanced around the area. "...though, if we could find some of Eggman's or Metal's inventions that haven't been destroyed... maybe we could find a way to reveal the monster to everyone."

"That's a start," Charmy said, standing up from where he sat. "But where would we look for such a thing?"

Sonic recalled something. "...hey Tails, you got Chip's necklace on you?"

"...I do believe so..." Tails muttered, as he searched his person, before finding what he searched for; a small necklace with a sizeable gemstone on it. "Here we are. Do you think we should use this to take care of the beast, Sonic?"

"Yeah, I'm hoping it'll have some effect on him," Sonic said. "I mean, before, he was afraid of it when you-" and Sonic stopped. Suddenly blurting out the knowledge that he had seen the two battle would probably make Tails uncomfortable.

"...Sonic?" Tails uttered, curious as to why he stopped, along with how he knew that Deity had confronted him.

"...when you, uh, used it on him in your house that last second," Sonic finished sheepishly, smoothing out his cobalt blue quills uneasily. "Sorry, we kinda saw that."

"...so... you saw..." Tails muttered, as he rubbed the back of his head. "...I must have looked like an old loon, right?"

"I wouldn't say that; you were really brave, Tails." Mighty said with a nod.

"Yeah, you did better than we would have," Knuckles added; and he thought about how that would sound, coming from the guardian that had been assassinated by the bat.

"...thanks..." Tails muttered sheepishly, before glancing at Sonic. "...so, how are we going to use this?"

"...maybe it can be used to power up a weapon that we can shoot at it," Sonic guessed.

"Eggman's cannon overloaded when Metal tried to kill that creature the first time, so we can't use that..." Charmy reminded. "...I'm wondering if any of Boomer's custom made weapons might do the trick."

"That could work..." Tails hummed, as he rubbed his chin. "...but how do we-"

At that point, Metal Sonic suddenly slammed right into the building they all stood on, having been hit by one of the dragon's swipes. *"...kkh..."* he grunted, as he tried getting back on his feet, glaring at the group fighting. *"...I won't let that beast destroy my city any further..."* he growled.

"Idea," Sonic sung, grinning. Yanking Chip's necklace out of Tails hand, Sonic fluttered down to Metal. "Hey Metal, think you could find this any use?" he asked, showing Metal the necklace.

Blinking, Metal took the necklace from Sonic, eying it. *"...what am I supposed to use this for?"* he uttered.

"We're all thinking that it might have some effect on that thing," Sonic said. "Tails used it before when Deity tried to kill him...and he stepped away from it like it was the plague!"

"...is that right...?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at the necklace.

"...well, I'll make sure to put it to good use... when I can see where the dragon's thrashing about." he muttered dryly.

"That's the thing Metal-head!" Sonic snapped. "We think that Chip's Necklace might bring that thing out for everyone to see!"

"...you think so?" Metal hummed, as he slipped the necklace around his wrist. *"...very well, then; let's see if it has any effect."* At that point, he rocketed right back towards the battlefield.

"...at least, we hope it does," Amy muttered. Sonic, in the meantime, watched Metal fly away...then he got the urge to follow him. "Sonic?" Amy uttered, watching Sonic fly toward the battlefield.

"What is he doing?" Shadow uttered in disbelief, as he watched Sonic leave. "He's only going to endanger himself like that!"

Back at the battlefield, everyone continued to try and attack the monster, but according to Jill, they STILL weren't making any progress. It just didn't make any sense...and there was no way to tell them that...

"...how are we supposed to kill this thing?" King growled, as he shot an arc of electricity at where he assumed the dragon was.

Still clinging to the dragon's leg, Wiper gritted his teeth, cautiously climbing upwards. *...if I can reach the head...* he thought, as he looked upwards.

At that point, Metal finally got back to the battlefield, and with a quick move, he swung his sword at where he assumed one of the dragon's wings were, intending to cut it right off.

Metal made a pretty accurate guess, and everyone heard the Dragon roar as it fell to the city with another mighty quake. To Jill's eyes though, the severed wing vanished within a trail of smog, and returned to the joint, reappearing in place as if Metal hadn't cut the wing at all. Her eyes widened at this.

"What happened?" Jill jumped, seeing Sonic right beside her. "Did Metal get him?"

Not sure how to put it, Jill made an unsure "so-so" gesture with a hand.

"...now what's that supposed to mean?" Sonic asked, with Jill sighing. She was not the best at charades.

Looking at where he sliced, Metal growled, gripping his sword even tighter with the hand that the necklace was wrapped around. *"Would you reveal yourself?"* he growled, as he rocketed right at the dragon again, swiping the sword with furious strength.

Metal hit the Dragon's side, and as usual it cried out.

But everyone started to see something slowly appear. First came its shadow on the ground from the moonlight, and then it grew into a transparent figure, showing what Metal was attacking.

Jill gasped, while Sonic grinned. "Thought so," he said.

"...what the..." Lock uttered, as he looked up at Metal. "...how did he do that?"

Frowning, Metal allowed his sword to revert back into a sphere, before it began whirling around like a circular saw again. With a yell, he hurled it at the dragon, intending for the rotating blades to slice off the dragon's wings in one fell swoop.

The wings popped off and crashed to the ground while the Dragon snarled at Metal angrily. Like Jill had seen before, the wings simmered within a black smog, and returned to the joints back in place, looking unharmed whatsoever.

"Aw c'mon!" complained Cal. "That's just cheap!"

"Well, it *is* just a spirit," Sonic remarked, catching Jill's attention immediately.

… *it's a spirit?* She thought. THAT'S why it came back, even after she and Metal killed it! THAT'S why the attacks weren't doing anything to it!

"...you goddamn..." Metal uttered, as the sphere returned to him.

"...then I'll take the head!" The two spheres suddenly joined together and formed a massive claymore, which Metal was forced to hold with both his hands. Letting out a massive battle cry, Metal swung the claymore right at the dragon's head.

Didn't he just see that his attack failed? Wiper thought, as he looked down at the ground. ...and couldn't he wait with trying to bring the dragon down until I get off it?

The head rolled onto the ground, and for a minute, the body stumbled onto its knees…then the head repeated the same method as the wings, vanishing within black smog and returning to its headless neck. Then it got back up, and roared at Metal again; obviously irritated with what the hedgehog did.

"Even if we can see the dragon now, it's not doing anything," Sonic growled. "…how're we supposed to stop a spirit?"

That triggered memories within Jill.

Johnny…Sprinter turning into fog, snaring him…Callous weakening him down to absorb…

It was then that Jill knew she would have to do something totally outrageous.

...she had to absorb Deity's Novagod's soul, to ensure that he wouldn't harm anyone ever again...

But could it even be done? And if she did absorb his soul, what would keep him from trying to consume her from the inside out, just like he had done with Johnny?

"...kkh..." At that point, Miser suddenly began firing salvos from her rail-gun right at the dragon's leg, just above where Wiper was hanging; thankfully not hitting him.

"Miser?" Seeing that, King looked towards the rhino. "What're ya doing?"

"We need to get Wiper off that dragon somehow!" Miser called, not letting up her assault.

"Hang on! I can get him no problem!" Someone else ran out of hiding from a building, which turned out to be Silver. Using his telekinesis, he aimed to pull Wiper right off and put him to safe ground.

Jill tried to think about what she was going to do. Absorbing Deity's soul was a terrible idea! The vampire would do anything to take over her…use her…

…but then again, the reason Deity took over Johnny was because his Corruption was spiraling out of control. Jill didn't control Corruption.

She controlled Unity.

It could keep him locked away! As long as she was strong enough to resist his advances to take over her, maybe...maybe it could work! This way she could know that Deity would no longer be able to harm anyone ever again!

Once Wiper landed on the ground thanks to Silver, he glared up at the dragon. "...we have to stop it, somehow..."

"...maybe it can be damaged from the inside?" Lock presumed, as he folded his arms.

Jill felt as if she was totally sure of it...but that wasn't like Jill to be so confident, especially with such a crazy idea…

Could it be Callous? Was Callous suggesting doing this?

Do it.

That voice in her head was enough for her to decide. Jill rapidly charged for the reptile monster; determination pumping through her just as madly as her own heart did. The Dragon swiped at her, but Jill jumped, and it tried again, but she moved the other way. No matter how much the dragon tried to get her, she was WAY too quick. Finally, the Dragon stamped its foot down on top of her, buried within another crater under its foot.

Cal's eyes widened, "Jill!"

Suddenly, the Dragon jerked, and roared, while trying to pull its foot out; but it couldn't. Its foot was stuck. Jill slowly emerged from the crater, holding the foot firmly in her grip, while digging her fingers into the foot. Dark energies emitted off the dragon, and rushed to her hands...being taken in by her. She cringed. With the overwhelming dark energy she was absorbing, it was hurting her. It even started to scar her with those strange markings, and bring back the wounds she had healed times before, and this time, they were coming in too rapidly to heal. The markings grew bigger, darker...

...even a trail of blood came out of her nose.

Absorbing Deity's soul was damaging her.

Everyone was stunned at Jill's sudden act, but none more so than Metal; especially since he just realized what she was doing. *"JILL!"* he yelled, as he instantly rocketed down to underneath the foot, jabbing one of his hands into it, whilst placing one arm on Jill's shoulder. *"...I'll take care of this!"*

As he said that, the dark energies began flowing into his own body, not only from the dragon, but also from Jill. Instantly, the dark markings returned to his arms, as one could see several nasty wounds open up all over his body; some organic, and others mechanic, somehow.

Sonic was startled by this, "Metal!"

Jill was shocked…she didn't want Metal to do this!

The Dragon yelped, and slowly started deteriorating away as Metal absorbed it in. Finally, it lifted its foot and shook Jill and Metal off, throwing them onto the ground. Jill tried to get back up, but she was so weakened that she barely had the strength to do so. She was aching all over, and it was getting harder to catch her breath.

Gritting his teeth, Metal quickly got to his feet, in spite of his horrid injuries. *"...I'm not going... to let you roam free!"* he roared, rushing right at the dragon once more, jabbing his hands into the beast's leg. The dark markings expanded across his body, and one could see parts of his body turning mechanic again, whilst some parts of him

remained organic.

Jill grew extremely fearful for Metal, but she had been so weakened she couldn't get to him.

Growling in pain, Metal kept absorbing the dragon as best he could, though now, wounds were opening up all over his body; wounds not even made during the past few weeks.

"...what's happening to him?" Wiper uttered in utter shock.

"...it's catching up to him." At that point, Shadow appeared by Sonic and Jill. "Trying to absorb that dragon caused Jill injuries... however, Metal has suffered a lot more injuries than Jill in the past, and this process seems to be bringing all those injuries back."

Jill wanted to plead for Metal to stop right now before he did any permanent damage on himself. If only she could speak!

The Dragon was growing sluggish, and least resistant as Metal was growing closer to absorbing it entirely.

Gritting his teeth, Metal sank down to one knee, though he still kept on absorbing the spirit, glaring up at it. *"...you're done for... Novagod!"* he yelled.

Jill rose to her feet, and limped toward him. Then as she built her strength, she sped up to a frantic sprint for Metal. This was around the time that the Dragon let out one last fatal cry, before finally disappearing within Metal.

Breathing heavily, Metal simply looked up at where the dragon once stood, before slowly, a smirk crawled across his lips. *"...heh... I... did it..."* he uttered, collapsing, weakly pushing one of his arms against the ground so that he wouldn't slam face-first into the ground.

Jill finally reached him, and knelt down to try and pick him up off the ground, but the most she managed to do was turn him up, holding him. Everyone else just about rushed to Metal, but they kept a distance away from the two, seeing Jill in worried tears over Metal.

"...gnh..." Metal uttered as he winced. *"...I... do hope that's the last*

we see of him..." he muttered, as if his injuries weren't even a factor to the current situation. Weakly, Metal glanced at Sonic. *"...he's not... coming back now... is he?"*

"After that..." Sonic croaked "...I think its safe to say that he's not coming back this time..."

"...that's... good to hear..." Metal uttered, before wincing again. *"Kkh... that took a lot out of me..."*

Jill hated herself for not being able to speak right now. She wanted to tell Metal that he didn't have to do that; he didn't have to make that sacrifice of imprisoning that demon within him! She didn't want him to do that... She didn't even bother stopping herself from crying right now.

"...now... what are you crying over...?" Metal uttered, as he glanced at Jill. *"...did you really expect me... to let you go and do something reckless... only hours after being revived...?"*

The sorrowful ewe could only look at him, unable to reply. He still didn't have to take that burden...

"...even if my body were to be destroyed..." Metal uttered, as he looked up at the sky. *"...it'd be worth it... if it meant that you'd be able to live on..."*

"...we've got to give him a medical check-up." Wiper suddenly said, looking at the group surrounding Jill and Metal. "He sustained those injuries while in his Super form, but if he reverts to normal..."

Cal knew exactly where to take Metal, so he marched over and picked Metal up. Jill fearfully clung to Metal, and Cal tried to comfort her, "Don't worry Jill. I promise that I won't let anything happen to him." Slowly, Jill let Metal go, and Cal hoisted Metal up and carried him off.

...I wouldn't make a promise you might not be able to keep, Sonic thought with some concern.

"...Sonic." Shadow muttered, as he watched Cal take Metal away. "We need to inform the others."

"Yeah," Sonic said, taking a glance at Jill who quickly tried to limp away after Cal.

However, before she could get far, she was stopped by Wiper and King. "...he's going to need rest." Wiper said, as he simply looked at Jill.

"But you got roughed up, too..." King muttered. "...so you oughta take it easy until you get better, and hope that Metal pulls through, alright?"

Jill wanted to prove she was just fine so that she could follow Cal, and so she tried to heal herself.

Nothing happened.

Jill stumbled to her knees in total disbelief. Silver walked on up to her and set a hand of sympathy on her shoulder, but she didn't respond. She was so broken down she couldn't do anything…

"...come on. Let's go." Wiper muttered, walking back towards the others, leaving King and Silver to lead Jill with them as well.

Upon returning to the group, Hunter spotted them approaching. "What happened?" he shouted to them from far away. "Did you guys actually beat that thing?"

"...yeah." Newt muttered, as he was carrying Boomer in his arms whilst approaching the group. "Jill and Metal found a way to take care of it..."

"…Aye, aye, aye…" uttered Flamenco, observing the injured. Boomer looked to be in much better condition than Jill though, whose wounds looked pretty severe. Then he noticed someone missing. "And where is Metal?"

"...he's taking a check-up." King muttered. "He took a brutal beating..."

"How are Brick and the others?" Silver asked.

"They're doing okay," Hunter said. "Nothing too bad…they should

wake up pretty soon."

"...well, that's a relief..." Miser muttered, as she glanced towards Sage, who simply looked at the group with a serious expression.

"...we should rest up." Sage eventually muttered, as she closed her eyes.

Silver and King helped Jill to sit against a wall, and she quietly sat there to sink in her depression rather then try to rest. With the atmosphere heavy, the group began settling down; weary after this bittersweet conclusion to the battle.

Chapter 88

CHAPTER – EIGHTY-EIGHT

"Geez…" Cal murmured. "…you're in a critical condition for sure…"

"...hrm..." Metal winced, as he glanced at Cal. *"...tell me something I don't know..."*

Cal arrived to the room he was looking for; the same room that Metal had brought Cal times before and he even placed Metal onto the same table he once laid on. "Shouldn't take long to run a check," Cal said, stopping by the large computer beside the table.

As Cal turned the computer on, a password prompt appeared on the screen. Before Cal could even attempt to figure it out, a pair of tendrils emerged from Metal's body, typing in the password fairly quickly. *"...you'll need to be cautious..."* Metal muttered, as he weakly glanced up at Cal. *"...with the state my body's in... you'll need to not only repair my mechanic parts... but also give me regular first-aid to heal me..."*

"…right," Cal responded, typing up to prepare an examination of Metal.

Closing his eyes, Metal actually managed to force a small smile. *...at least...* he thought. *...it's finally over...*

Small wires popped out from above, and started inching toward Metal while Cal pulled away from the computer to look for a First Aid kit. "I'm amazed that you're still in your Super form," he remarked.

"...somehow, so am I..." Metal uttered, as he glanced at Cal, whilst the wires slowly plugged into his body. *"...but I'll need to revert soon... so we can put the Chaos Emeralds back in place..."*

"But after we fix you up, do you really intend to pilot the city again?" Cal asked. "Not even taking the chance to rest?" He found a kit somehow, and pulled it out; looking to make sure it had bandages,

medical tape, disinfectant, etc…

"...someone has to pilot it..." Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes again. *"...and quite frankly... I only trust myself as the pilot..."*

Cal let out a weary sigh, and brought the First Aid kit on over to Metal's side. Then he proceeded on tending to Metal's organic wounds. "...what exactly did you do, Metal?" he asked. "I understand you...absorbed Deity Novagod's soul?"

"...so I did..." Metal muttered. *"...Jill attempted to do the same... but I wouldn't want that... to happen to her... not after she lost her voice..."*

"...good grief," Cal murmured. "First she dies this morning...now she was willing to seal away that monster inside her...she's noble, I'll give her that."

"...you could say that..." Metal muttered, as he glanced down at his arms. *"...though, I wonder... why absorbing his soul caused me such injury...?"*

"Well...if the level of his energies I sensed was any indication," Cal remarked. "...maybe there was just so much Corruption down in the very core of the soul itself."

"...again with Corruption..." Metal muttered, before chuckling. *"...those three forces have been... a major headache to me..."* At that point, he winced in pain again.

"I'll say. Look what it's done to you," Cal said, examining a rather deep cut on his arm. Course, he didn't just mean that, but everything; from feeling emotions, to transforming him into this.

"...but at least we can all take solace... knowing that he won't come back..." Metal muttered, as he let out a sigh of relief.

"Alright...that's all for your organic wounds," Cal said, pulling back to look at all the bandages he administered to Metal. "Looks like it will still take some time for the mechanical repairs to catch up. I should check with Tails Doll to see how the others are doing outside."

"...you do that..." Metal nodded, as he turned his head away from Cal. *"...now... I'll need rest..."*

"I'll be right outside the door," Cal said with a nod, exiting the room right after.

Nodding, Metal began relaxing, his consciousness slipping away...

...I open my eyes... and find that I'm in a dark void. Now what? Am I dreaming again? I suppose it's normal, seeing how my condition has changed, but... why this dark void? Is my imagination that lacking?

Or...perhaps something was responsible for this dark void.

"So...you decided to absorb me instead of allowing Jillian to do so..."

Blinking, I looked around in curiosity. "...I wouldn't allow her to suffer an existence with you in her body." I muttered.

" *Of course…she has grown on you. Still…does that halt me from finding another way?"*

"...you're not getting your goddamn hands on her." I muttered, as I clenched my hands together. "Even if it tears me apart from within... I'll make sure that you never get to her."

" *I am a part of you now, so who is to say I cannot…for instance, take over you?"*

"...you can't." I responded with a scoff. "I've been through a lot worse than anything you can cook up, so I'll simply endure. My body is not yours for the taking."

" *I see. You intend to protect her from me at all costs then." A figure made its entrance out of the darkness of the void, which was unlikely to be anyone else but Deity Novagod. He was no longer the monstrous form he used to be; simply the Mobian bat with short silvery white hair, and black leathers. In his hands, he held something, but it was hidden within curled fingers, so it couldn't be seen.*

" *But you would leave her, rather than remain; which from what I*

observed is against the way you feel for her," he spoke.

"...I cannot stay with her." I hissed, as I simply glared at the bat. "They'd all be better off if I remained as their enemy."

"*… now this becomes stranger. You feel for her…yet you still wish for her to see you as her enemy?" Deity supposed.*

"...that is for the best." I muttered. "Especially since I have you within me, now."

Deity opened his hand, showing what he held. It was a small, black, crystal orb, and he looked at it while he continued, "…do you really believe you can run away from her?"

"...I'm not running." I replied. "I'm standing in place, allowing her to leave me." Then, I glanced at the orb. "Now, what is that?"

" *A tool," he bluntly answered, just as a small glow grew from within.*

"*… Metal, how could you?"*

Somehow, someway…it was Jill's voice. I blinked, looking at the orb in astonishment. "...what... was that?" I uttered in shock.

" *What else could it be?" Deity answered. "It was, and* is *, her voice."*

" *Metal, I didn't want you to do that…I didn't want you to suffer for me…why did you do it?" her voice continued.*

" *Well now, this sounds familiar," Deity murmured. "…could it be she feels the same way you felt when she sacrificed her life for you?"*

Hearing that, I stepped back in disbelief, before shaking my head. "...I... couldn't let her absorb you, Deity. If I allowed that, it would be even worse than letting her die again..."

" *Oh, I wouldn't be telling me that; I would tell* her *that," Deity said. "For you see…these are the things she wishes to say, but how unfortunate that she can't…"*

" *Metal…don't leave…please…" her voice went on hauntingly.*

"...bastard..." I growled, trying to ignore what Jill's disembodied voice said, as I walked up to Deity. "...now, tell me; how can she regain her voice?"

" *She is meant to be mute for life," Deity said; the orb fading from its glow. "And even if you were to wrestle this out of my grasp, you would not be able to figure it out; nor are you currently capable of returning her voice to her."*

"...hmph." Scoffing, I stopped directly in front of the vampire, glaring at him. "I'll get that information out of you, Novagod... and I'll find a way to give her back her voice."

" *Now, what reason would I give you the information?" Deity answered. "You cannot truly do any harm to me, now that I am a part of you….as to what I can do to you, however…" he snapped his fingers.*

Blinking, I could only watch as something appeared by Deity's side... and what I saw blew me away.

There, right besides the vampire, a demonic, mechanical hedgehog was standing, Corruption oozing from his body, and an evil glint in his eyes.

That was me as I had seen in my vision earlier.

"...you intend..." I uttered, as I glared at that version of me. "...to turn me into that?"

" *I cannot do anything, really, except tamper with the strength of your mentality," Deity said. "You have the capability of reverting to that all by yourself. The matter is…can you resist it?"*

Gritting my teeth, I looked back at Deity. "You'd better believe that I can resist it." I spat. "I can hold that transformation at bay for as long as I need it."

" *Show me then," Deity responded, making a gestural cue for the Corruption-based mechanical hedgehog. Hissing, the monstrous hedgehog rushed right at me, trying to swipe its claws at me; thankfully, I was quicker than it, stepping back to avoid it. As it*

recovered its balance, it glared up at me with a snarl.

"...that is nothing but an animal, Novagod." I uttered, as I formed a sword in my right hand, holding it properly. "An animal that needs to be put down." Then, I rushed right at the beast, swinging my sword at it.

With a roar, the beast quickly bared its hands against the blade of my sword, keeping both of us at a stalemate; however, I was pushing the beast further back, keeping my cool, in spite of the risk that I put myself at.

Deity only watched; somehow amused by this even if he had no expression on his face.

Roaring, the beast suddenly pushed me backwards, and lunged at me, swiping its claws at me. Barely, I managed to raise my sword to block its grisly claws from reaching me, as the monster somehow seemed to bare teeth. I grit my teeth; seeing this monstrosity reminded me all too much of the Metal Overlord incident; how I had lost control of myself, and declared myself ruler of the world in my madness...

...I would not make that mistake again.

Yelling, I quickly swung my sword so that the beast was knocked away, and then rushed at it, jabbing my sword right into it. Surprisingly, it didn't react to my attack in time, resulting in it taking the attack directly in his gut; the sword piercing right through his body. I could see Corruption dripping from the tip of the blade that emerged from the monster's back; I had wounded it.

Deity didn't make any response whatsoever; except maybe humming with interest.

Roaring, the beast grabbed hold of the sword with its arms, Corruption flowing from them, as it slowly pulled the sword out from its body...

...at least, that's what I assumed it would do. Instead, the creature shoved the blade further into its body, pulling me closer to it. I could

almost smell the rancid odor emitting from its grotesque mouth, as its head malformed into a jagged, demonic shape, opening its mouth to reveal several blackened teeth, waiting to take a bite of me.

Growling, I quickly let go of the blade and opened my hand, letting a trio of sharpened tendrils shoot out of my palm, piercing the beast through its mouth. Even as it let out a pained growl, I knew fully well that it wasn't going to be enough to kill it. With a scoff, I cast a glance at Deity.

" *Is that all you can do?" he questioned; almost a hint of innocent curiosity in his voice.*

Gritting my teeth, I looked back at the beast, who snarled once more; while it still seemed ready for combat, the wounds I had inflicted on it looked like they had made the beast more sluggish. That, I thought, was my chance.

Grabbing the handle of my blade, I quickly pulled it out from the beast's gut, retracting the tendrils from its mouth as well, and with a mighty yell, I swung the blade vertically at the beast, with enough force to actually create a tremor.

For a while, nothing happened. However, soon enough, the beast slowly collapsed, as a massive wound appeared on its body. With a small smirk, I looked back at Novagod. "...does that answer your question?" I quipped.

" *It does," Deity said, not affected in the slightest by his minion falling. Little by little, he withered away within the darkness of the void. "…I will rest for now, but be warned that another time will come again."*

"...I'll be ready for it." I muttered, as I dropped the blade, watching Deity vanish. "Count on it."

Finally, Metal opened his eyes, as he looked up at the ceiling of the work lab. *...Novagod...* he thought.

The entrance to the lab opened and Cal strolled in, coming to the computer. "Alright, let's see how those repairs are going," he said.

"...sure..." Metal replied disdainfully, as he glanced at his body. Thankfully, while he had been asleep, several of his mechanical injuries had been repaired, though one could still see the trail of welded metal across his mechanical parts; likely, his wounds had been welded shut after the circuitry beneath them had been repaired.

"It's better than it looks," Cal remarked, noticing Metal looking at himself. "It says here that the repairs are all done for the most part."

"...that's a relief..." Metal muttered, as he glanced away from Cal again.

The wires attached to Metal suddenly plucked away, and retreated above from whence they came. "Tails Doll said that the ones knocked out in the attack are going to be fine…but Jill couldn't heal her wounds somehow," Cal mentioned. "They had to tend to her as well…"

"...I see..." Metal hummed, still not looking at Cal.

"They've moved to the Living Quarters in the buildings that weren't destroyed down below," Cal said, pulling away from the computer and looking at Metal. "So…what's your course of action?" he suddenly asked.

Blinking, Metal glanced at Cal. *"...come again?"* he inquired.

"I mean, once you take the Chaos Emeralds back to the underground," Cal said. "Now that Deity is gone, what do you want to do? You can't really have Metropolis flying in the air forever with everyone aboard, now can you?" Then he scratched his head. "I need to know because…well…" he looked too embarrassed to say.

Blinking, Metal looked away from Cal. *"...you and Tails Doll..."* he muttered, before he closed his eyes. *"...are dismissed."*

Cal looked surprised to hear that, but didn't question it. Finally, he nodded.

"...I'll take the emeralds down underground..." Metal muttered, as he slowly sat up, holding his head. *"...after that, I'll land the city, and*

allow you all to go to your own homes... because frankly, I need time on my own."

"…I understand," Cal said, getting up to leave.

"...Cal." Metal said, as he got off the bed, glancing towards the simian. *"...thanks."* Then the hedgehog-metallix walked out of the chamber.

Cal stood there watching Metal leave. A thousand times he imagined this moment, and it didn't go quite like what he expected at all. He only hoped that from here on out, things would get better and with that, he left the lab.

In one of the buildings down below, Brick just opened his eyes, and the first thing he knew of was a sore headache. "Ow..." he groaned, sitting up and rubbing his head.

"Finally awake, huh?" he'd hear Wiper say, as the cobra was leaning against the wall directly opposite of the bull. "Some of us were starting to get worried."

Brick looked to Wiper while he continued to rub his head. "What hit me?"

"That dragon from before." Wiper shrugged. "Jill and Metal took care of it, though..."

"...whoa, really?" Brick asked, truly amazed. The last he recalled though, that thing was totally invisible. How could Metal and Jill-and he gasped when something came to mind, "-where's Brownie?"

"She's being taken care of." Wiper said, as he folded his arms. "Both Jill and Metal took a brutal beating from the fight... but she'll be alright."

"...I wanna see her!" and Brick threw off the covers, hopped out of the bed he was in, and aimed for the door.

"Whoa, wait right there, cowboy!" Before Brick could get out,

however, Punk grabbed hold of him from behind, keeping him in place. "We haven't been given the okay to see her, yet, so ya gotta be patient!"

"Damn it, man! Don't call me Cowboy!" Brick barked, but his reaction was based mostly on the fact that he really wanted to see Jill.

"Hey, yelling at my brother is *my* job, so just calm down, okay?" Gale grumbled.

"Just remain calm, Brick." Wiper said, placing a hand on the bull's shoulder. "Sage, Queen and Miser are tending to her right now. Sage is going to tell Hunter when it's okay to come see her, and he'll tell us in turn."

"...fine," Brick murmured, but he wasn't happy about it.

"Alright, let's get ya back to bed, until it's okay to see her..." Punk muttered, leading Brick back towards the bed.

In another part of the same building, Jill was lying on a soft bed as well. She could hardly move without feeling pain, and she was still utterly confused at the fact that she couldn't heal herself, no matter how she tried. Had she lost it somehow? In the circumstances, she was growing less motivated to even heal herself anyway.

"And that ought to do it." Standing by her side were Sage, Queen and Miser, the latter just putting aside some medical equipment. "You should be alright if you lay down for a while, Jill." Miser said with a small smile.

"Should we call Hunter, now?" Queen inquired, as she threw Sage a glance.

"I'll take care of it." Sage nodded, as she closed her eyes. *Alright, Hunter; it's done.*

Thanks. I'll tell them, Hunter responded.

Jill closed her eyes and tried to relax on the softness of the pillow. Perhaps it was just hard to grasp the fact that things were finally over now...her struggle had lasted nearly 1 year and a half; though

just a short number, it felt like forever...and it felt like a war.

So, it's finally over, now? Sage hummed in Jill's mind, even though she was indulging in small talk with Queen and Miser.

Still...Jill felt skeptic about it. Times before she thought it was over, only to find out it wasn't. The only way she could answer Sage was, *...I hope so.*

Don't worry; I'm sure it's over this time. Sage replied.

...maybe you're right , Jill thought, trying to put on a smile. She genuinely felt relieved...even with the sadness of losing her voice, possibly her powers...and maybe a dear friend she would miss so much. A friend that she hoped she would see again...

Opening her eyes she suddenly saw something.

Snow. A pale white sky showering gently down with snow. It's coldness was bitter, but it didn't bite, and she could see her breath in puffs of white. Someone stood beside her in this snowfall, holding her hand, and looking over, she saw a smile. A small, innocent smile. This one was quite little; or was Jill just taller? She saw her own sweetness reflected in this little one, and seeing so much of herself in her made Jill smile as well. Again, she looked so much like her...tiny, curled, maroon horns, big green eyes...how her tiny hands felt as Jill held them, how precious she was...

"Mama...you look sad," the little ewe girl said.

Jill jolted, and found herself back on that bed in that room with Queen, Miser and Sage.

...what did she just see?

It was something strange, but while Jill wanted to question it, it had touched her. Whatever it was, it evoked her tears again, and she closed her eyes as they rolled down silently.

"...perhaps... we should leave her." Queen hummed, as she had glanced at Jill.

"...you two go on without me." Sage said with a nod to Miser and Queen, as the two went out of the door, leaving the raven alone with Jill. *...is something the matter?* she asked Jill after a brief moment of silence.

...I don't know what I saw... Jill thought, wiping away her tears. *...but seeing that little face just made me want to cry...*

...what little face? Sage hummed, as she blinked.

...it was some sort of vision, and I was holding a little girl's hand... Jill thought, trying to sit up. *...she looked just like me...*

...just like you, now? Sage hummed, as she sat down on a chair, looking at Jill. *...don't tell me... your daughter?*

...she called me Mama, Jill thought, her eyes widening. *...maybe you're right...but...why would I...?* It didn't really make sense at all. Did she see a vision in the future? C'mon, she was capable of a lot of things, but seeing the future was beyond her ability...

...just relax, Jill. Sage thought with a small smile, as she placed an arm on Jill's shoulder. *I'm sure that everything's going to be alright.*

...yeah, Jill thought, trying to smile. That's when the door opened, and she turned her head to see Brick and the kids walk in; or more like barge in all at once. They all looked pretty worried to her.

"Jill! You're okay!" Ani said, getting to the bed first.

"Man, it's great to see you back in shape, Jill!" Jack said with a smile, as he got to the bed as well.

Brick came over around the other side calmly, next to Sage. "You're okay now, right?" he asked, getting a nod from Jill. "Geez Brownie...you're always getting hurt." Jill shrugged at that, making Brick chuckle.

"How long do you think until Jill's well enough to walk?" Milo asked, promptly getting whacked by Ani, "OW!"

"C'mon Milo, her legs aren't broken," Ani remarked, although

stopped to ponder it. "...are they?"

Jill shook her head no with an amused smile on her face.

"Well, that's a relief..." Jack said, as he wiped his brow. "...Sage, do you think I could play her a get-better song?" he asked, glancing at the raven.

"...I dunno..." Sage hummed, as she looked at Jill. "Do you want him to play a song, Jill?"

Jill's smile widened, and she nodded. She thought that was very sweet of Jack, and that she'd love to hear a "get-better" song.

Smiling, Jack took out his harmonica, and inhaled... before stopping. "...wait a sec..." Quickly, he checked the harmonica, before sighing in relief. "The microphone's off." Then, he began playing a calm, soothing melody on the instrument.

Whew, good thing he remembered the microphone, Milo thought, while they all listened to the music.

Down the hall, Gale and Punk were coming to the door and they halted when they heard the music. "...you hear that?" she asked her brother.

"...yeah, I do." Punk nodded. "Someone's good with the harmonica, alright..."

"Probably that Jack kid then," Gale said. She felt like she didn't want to disturb, so she leaned against the wall near the door. "...I never thought we'd go through this today," she said.

"Neither did I..." Punk muttered, leaning against the wall as well, looking up at the ceiling. "...but at least it's over, now."

Gale looked around. "...have you seen Grandpa?" she asked.

"Can't say that I have..." Punk shrugged.

"Huh...wonder where he went," Gale murmured, continuing to look around.

"Eh, wherever he is, I'm sure he can handle himself." Punk noted, as he rubbed the back of his head. "...unless he fell asleep while standing up..."

Gale laughed. "That's a funny sight I'd like to see..."

Elsewhere, Sonic, and the gang waited for Metal to finish placing the Chaos Emeralds in, so that Knuckles, Tikal and Chaos could take the Master Emerald. "And..." Metal uttered, as he placed the final emerald back in its place. "...that should be it." After that, he stepped away from the pedestals, though stumbling a bit.

"Now, now, Metal, don't strain yourself..." Tails uttered, as he placed a hand on the hedgehog-metallix's shoulder.

"...I'll be alright..." Metal muttered, as he glanced at Knuckles. "...there... you can take the Master Emerald, now..."

"Right," he motioned for Tikal and Chaos to come along, and all three picked up the large emerald; even though Knuckles knew he could carry it by himself.

"Charmy...are you going to tell Cream about this?" Amy asked, looking up to the old bee.

"Well...wouldn't be fair to her if I kept it secret, would it?" Charmy said with a shrug.

"I do wonder if she's going to believe it..." Mighty muttered. "I mean, if I were alive, I'd find the whole thing pretty bizarre."

"I'm sure she'll believe us..." Tails muttered, as he glanced at Metal, who simply looked away from the spirits.

"...so...is this goodbye?" Charmy muttered, finding it hard to look at the spirits.

"...nah, I wouldn't say it's goodbye," Sonic said, trying to think of a way to put it in a more positive light. "I mean...we'll see you guys again, because we'll wait for you..."

"...it could take a while, though, Sonic..." Tails muttered, as he

looked towards the hedgehog.

"Eh, we can wait!" Vector said with a smile. "But don't get any weird ideas because of it!"

"Right..." Charmy chuckled.

"I suppose we should make a disappearance then," Rouge murmured. Then she looked at Metal. "Take good care of yourself now, Metal. There's no telling what'll happen after that stunt you pulled off..."

"...I've been through worse." Metal muttered, as he glanced at Sonic. "Someone in this room can vouch for that."

Knuckles, Tikal and Chaos entered down the tunnel, and gradually each of the spirits followed; Sonic being the last of them, while shooting Tails a glance. "You take care of yourself too, buddy," he said.

Tails nodded, as he gave Sonic a slight wave. "See you later, then?" he said with a small smile.

"...yeah," Sonic said, smiling back just in time to disappear into the tunnel, leaving behind Tails, Charmy and Metal in that underground chamber.

Sighing, Metal walked back towards the pedestals, simply watching the Chaos Emeralds.

"...Metal..." Tails uttered, as he glanced at the hedgehog-metallix. "...are you going to be alright?"

"...didn't I tell you people, already?" Metal muttered, as he closed his eyes. "...I'll be fine..."

"I'm curious," Charmy said. "After we've all left, do you intend to hang on to the Chaos Emeralds?"

"...someone needs to keep an eye on them." Metal muttered. "Now that Novagod's truly gone... there's no need to hide them all over the world again, is there?"

"That's right," Charmy said, nodding. "And I suppose they're the safest in your grasp."

Outside in the city...

"A warrior nation, huh?" Desperado murmured, rubbing his chin.

"You bet!" King laughed. "A nation where any warrior from anywhere in the world can band together, not as soldiers, but as a large family!"

"We're still in the planning phases for that, though... kekekekekeke..." Ripper chuckled.

"But, like, omigosh, that's so awesome!" Bliss cheered, clapping her hands together. "I'm so happy that you guys figured out something to do with your lives!"

"Indeed..." Sprinter mused, as he smiled as well.

"I'm impressed that Hunter had a daughter too," Desperado said, looking to the wolf. "...she's not like you."

Hunter sighed. "...I think she got that from her mother," he murmured.

"A lot has happened for these past 15 years..." Queen noted, as she leaned against a wall, glancing at the spirits. "...some things more crazy than others."

"But... we've all gotten through it." Miser said with a slight smile.

"I have to say I'm proud of all you guys," Desperado said, giving Miser a pat on her back.

"Like, so are we, too!" Bliss said, as she hung her arms around King's neck.

"Oh... thank you all." Miser said with a sheepish smile.

"Not just for bein' proud of us..." King began, as he scratched his neck. "...but also for helpin' us survive."

"Kekeke; can't forget that!" Ripper said with a grin.

Desperado chuckled, and that was when he looked up and saw the other spirits flying away. "...maybe we ought to say our goodbyes," he murmured, nudging his head to the flying spirits.

"...maybe so..." Sprinter muttered, as he sighed.

"Aaw, do we have to?" Bliss whined. "I still wanna stay here..."

"...it's okay." At that point, Wiper approached the group with a small smile. "Some time or another, we'll see each other again." As he said that, he glanced at Miser. "All of us."

Hearing that, Miser smiled.

Remembering the things Prowler told her, Desperado put his hand back on Miser's shoulder. "You're right Wiper," he said. "So I guess it isn't goodbye."

"Yeah, I suppose..." Miser nodded.

"Kekeke... until next time, then?" Ripper hummed.

"Right..." Sprinter nodded, as he and Bliss walked towards Desperado. "...until next time."

"Good luck with that warrior nation of yours," Desperado said, just for the three of the spirits to rise into the air to float away with the other spirits.

"...later!" King called, as he and the other agents waved at the spirits as they floated away.

They watched as they joined with Sonic and his gang, and all of them dwindled away in the night sky without a trace; Master Emerald included...

...except Shadow, who awaited Milo on the roof of the building. Once the little lion got there, he hugged the hedgehog tight. "I'm going to miss you, Shadow. Everyone will," he said.

"...I'll miss you, too..." Shadow muttered, returning the hug to Milo. "...now, be careful with Proxy; the only reason he was able to function without his head was because I kept him conscious. Since I won't be here..."

"I understand," Milo said, pulling away from the hug to place his hands on Shadow.

"...take care of yourselves." Shadow said, as he closed his eyes, smiling.

Milo's eyes glowed, before he closed his own eyes, and he channeled his power into his hands, which gave off a glow as well. Time passed while this process went on, concentrating on not only giving Proxy back control...but painlessly pulling Shadow out...

Thankfully, Shadow showed no signs of injury, as his spirit slowly emerged from the android's body.

Once Shadow was finally out, Milo reopened his eyes and took his hands away, feeling that the process was now complete. "...Proxy?" he called, hoping to get an answer.

Slowly, the android opened his eyes, as he looked at Milo. "...is it over?" he uttered, as he scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah," Milo said, nodding.

"How weird..." turning, Milo saw Silver walk up to the little lion, the android, and the lingering spirit. "I didn't know you had that kind of power..." he said.

"...it's really something, isn't it, Silver?" Shadow hummed, as he walked towards the gray hedgehog. "...are you planning on staying here?"

"You know," Silver murmured, while thinking about it. "...I'm really not sure. I'd like to stay, but I have to get back to my own time."

"...do you think the Professor can help you get back to your original time?" Milo asked.

Silver shrugged. "Tails might be able to find a way...but everyone needs a break after what happened."

"No kidding." Flamenco and Lin appeared on the roof next; Flamenco giving a big huff of relief that everything was over.

"...b-but at least things are fine, now..." Lin uttered shyly, rubbing her neck.

"...hm." Shadow nodded, as he glanced up at the sky. "...it's time..." he mused.

"...hope to talk to you again sometime, Shadow," Milo said, smiling.

"...so do I, Milo." Shadow said with a nod to the lion, before he began floating up in the air, after the other spirits.

"...increible..." Flamenco murmured under his breath in remark; not only to the spirits, but just about this whole thing.

"I'll say..." Lin nodded, as she sat down. "Phew... I need a nap, now that I think about it..."

"I think we all might need one..." Milo said, yawning. Just how late was it?

"...how about we go and find out?" Proxy said with a slight smile, as he looked up at the night sky.

Later in the control room, Metal was sitting on his own by the controls, making sure that the city was flying back towards where it once stood. *...now... what to do after this...* he thought.

He wasn't alone for long. The door to the control room opened, and Cal walked in, intending to check on Metal.

"...hello, Cal." Metal muttered, without glancing at the simian. "So... how does it feel to be off the hook?"

"It feels...weird," Cal said. "But I guess it means I can..." and he

stopped again. He was about to say that it meant he could be with Natal, but he hasn't said a thing about that to Metal. It wasn't a subject he wanted to get into with Metal anyway.

"...there's a whole world of options for you to go with, I take it?" Metal inquired, curious as to why Cal didn't finish his sentence.

"...yeah," Cal said, rubbing his neck sheepishly.

"...I see..." Metal hummed, as he returned his attention to the controls. "...so, have you told Tails Doll that he's free to stay with Jill's friends?"

"Yeah," Cal answered. "He was overjoyed that he'd get to stay with them...but he was a bit worried about you."

"...understandable..." Metal muttered. "...even though it's for the better... I'll still miss him." he eventually chuckled.

"...I still can't help but ask...what you're going to do," Cal asked. "You'll be all alone. Just what do you plan to do with yourself, Metal?"

"I'll figure it out eventually." Metal muttered. "...though, conquering the world's out of the question..."

Cal looked out the window, staring out at the night sky. "...but you plan as much as disappearing from the public media entirely at least?" he asked, looking at him. "After that message this morning, you'll have them swarming after you like hungry bees."

"They'll find nothing, if they try searching the city for me." Metal muttered. "Eventually... they'll probably assume that I perished in trying to take out my intended 'target'."

"At least it's for the best," Cal said.

"Indeed..." Metal nodded, as he closed his eyes. "...well, I shouldn't take up more of your time. Go and get ready; we'll be landing, soon."

"Alright," Cal said, turning obediently and leaving.

Once he was gone, Metal opened his eyes, as he worked out the controls. *...when they leave... just stay here. I'd rather not be forced to say goodbye...* he thought.

The city circled around its place until it was directly above the canyon that it once sat inside in the middle of this wasteland. Underneath the city the rocket thrusters decreased the amount of jet fuel it was blowing out, and the city cautiously began to descend down. The gravity in the entire city was momentarily lifted, and some of the ones inside the city had to hang onto something to keep from hitting the ceiling.

Some had fun with it.

"Wee! I'm a fish!" Ani laughed, swimming through the air in the room.

It wouldn't last long though. The city lowered down farther and farther, and soon it sunk back onto the ground where it had pulled away from before, returning gravity to the city. Ani and the others sunk back onto the ground, and she groaned in disdain, "Aw..."

"...I think he finally landed the city," Brick murmured.

"Seems like it..." Sage hummed, as she glanced at Jack, who had stopped playing due to the gravitational shift. "...then... I suppose it's time to leave."

...leave? Jill felt disappointed. But that didn't stop Brick from taking her, and he helped her out of the bed, walking her out the door where Gale and Punk were. Just as Gale was going to question what the shift in gravity was about, Brick answered her, "Metal's landed the city." While leading Jill down the hall, it brought the kids and Sage to follow, and eventually Gale and Punk. Boomer, Newt, Natal, Lock and Rudy joined them down the hall, and Silver, Flamenco, Lin, Milo and Proxy accompanied as well.

All of them emerged from the building, and confronted King and his group outside. Jet and Omega came from the Babylon Airship questioning what the shift in gravity was as well.

"Metal landed the city huh?" Hunter remarked.

"I suppose that makes sense..." King muttered, as he glanced around. "...so, where is that guy, anyway?"

"He's in the control room, I guess..." Just then, Tails Doll and Whisker approached the group as well. *"...but I don't think he's coming down from there..."* the plushie muttered.

Just then, everyone caught sight of Cal, walking toward them; having come from the tower. Hearing Tails Doll, he confirmed it, "Yeah, he's not coming down."

You mean...he's not even going to say goodbye? Jill thought in disdain.

"...hmph..." Whisker scoffed, as he glanced up at the tower with folded arms.

"...it'd be a waste to try and wait for him." Wiper muttered, as he glanced at Sage. "Let's go."

"Hey, now..." Jet began, as he rubbed the back of his head. "...you guys can catch a ride back home on the airship, if ya want."

"I think that would help a bunch," Rudy said.

Gale and Punk went over and opened the hatch of the airship, allowing a good many of them to enter inside while others climbed aboard Charmy's helicopter. Soon all of them were aboard an aircraft...that is, except Jill who longingly stared at the tip of that tower in the distance and Brick, who waited for her.

For a while, there was nothing that resided up on that tower. Then, however, Jill noticed one figure simply sitting on the tower, looking down at her.

Jill's hopes rose. Could that be Metal?

Brick didn't see it just yet. "We gotta go Brownie," he called.

Jill glanced back at him hesitantly, and then looked back up at the

tower.

Still, the figure was there, simply looking down at her.

Jill didn't want to leave...but she knew that she couldn't keep them waiting. She finally pulled herself away from the sight of that tower, and walked on over to Brick who helped her into the airship. "Okay, that's everybody," Brick called in. "Let's take off."

With that, the air crafts began taking off, leaving the city behind. Though, before the airship left, the figure on the roof closed his eyes. "...goodbye... Jill..." Metal muttered, just as the airship flew off into the distance.

"Dear Diary..."

"So much has happened since my last entry in this thing...so much...There's no way I could even try to write it all."

"My voice is gone...my powers are gone...but I'm on the path of healing. I've felt relaxed, and more content in the Clubhouse...and the encouragement of my friends is helping very much. I think I feel truly happy since Deity was put away for good..."

"...maybe not entirely though. There are times my mind falls on Metal again. The news have reported his disappearance to the public and the world was astonished. The presses questioned GUN thoroughly, but got very little answers. My friends requested GUN that they keep the story confidential...I didn't want to be overwhelmed with reporters, especially when I had no voice. The Commander understood, and to my gratitude, took care of it. The media has no clue about me...I'm entirely invisible. This was also a good opportunity to clear the names of the GUN agents; King, Queen, Ripper, Miser, Sage, and Hunter. They were so relieved..."

"...I still worry about Metal though. Is he alright? Has Deity tried anything? These questions remained unanswered now that he's gone...but I try to have faith. He's alright, I tell myself. He can handle it...he was willing to take that burden. After all, he was the one who

created Unity...something that still amazes me sometimes. But thinking of that only makes me think of the song I sang to him...and reminds me how much I miss my voice."

"But Brick won't let me be depressed, no. He's given me a wonderful Extreme Gear...something that he and the Professor finished after the events from a few days ago. He insisted I try it out at the Racing Dome in Future City, since he had a free pass. He told me how all of them went Extreme Gear racing during my training. It was nice to know that they weren't terrorized by Callous and Johnny the whole time..."

"Speaking of...Callous hasn't been active. I know she's still deep down inside me, but...she hasn't made a peep. It's concerning..."

"...maybe she's just trying to get over what happened. We did have to kill Johnny...er, 'defeat' him. Somehow, it just doesn't feel right to say we had to kill him. Brick asked me if I was crazy. because Johnny was a sadistic serial killer...I'm wondering if Callous and I joining together caused our feelings to mix as well, or maybe I was just considering how Callous would feel. She's become a more a part of me than I thought she would..."

"...the things that have happened...it still leaves me thinking about it."

"King and his group went ahead to start their warrior nation, Safe Haven; and Flamenco and Lin decided to join them. At first, I remembered it might not have been a good idea, but the changes that happened caused me to think that maybe it was a good idea after all...then again, I still feel like I have my doubts on it. There's always a chance for troublemakers, and even if Sage can make sure there aren't, there's that one person that can slink their way through. It happens. Then Boomer and Cal managed to convince Charmy to make the Chaotix a GUN unit; finding some compromise as opposed to leaving the Detective Agency for GUN. Charmy didn't like mingling with military, but he was more willing to cope with GUN than lose comrades. It gives Rudy something to look forward too as well I guess...he's all riled up about being a solder now. I could laugh about it if I had my voice."

"Tails Doll decided to stay with us. His company was also pretty comforting for us. Silver is staying with us too. He hopes that the Professor can get him back to his time soon, but until then, he's taking the time to enjoy himself."

"Proxy and Omega haven't quite figured out what they were going to do, but they started talking about the Space Colony ARK. I suppose they want to explore the ARK, and see if there was anything that needed to be taken care of since Shadow died."

"Sonic and his friends went back to...wherever they were when all this started. They weren't in my head to begin with, that's for sure...maybe they'll stay in that castle, with my mother...maybe that's where they were in the beginning...I assume Desperado, Bliss, and Sprinter are as well. Likely waiting for their friends too. I've had no dreams of them anymore...now that everything had been done."

"...still, I had one last dream. This little girl I saw that night on that bed, supposedly my daughter...she came to me once more, and this dream was what helped me back onto my feet after everything."

"She hugged me, and I held that little girl so dearly in my arms. In my dream, I felt like I had already known her...she was my most precious treasure that I would protect no matter what. 'Don't cry Mama,' she told me. 'I know you're sad, but things will get better; they always do.' I felt like she was right..."

"That was the last I saw her...for now at least, if she really turns out to be my daughter. But I still wonder how that's possible..."

"Even now I tried to find a name to give her. I'm not sure why...but I felt compelled to name her. I couldn't leave her without a name...and after brainstorming endlessly, I thought of a name that managed to fit. The way the little girl made me feel, or the feeling she brought me whenever I thought of her..."

"Joy."

"It was strange, but somehow she brought me joy. That smiling, innocent face that passed on that same smile to me; a smile that reminded me of happier times, back at my village with my father. A

time when I was that sweet, innocent...cheerful. A time before I knew of the horrible things I did now...when I wasn't banished."

"So her name is Joy...and like Metal, I hope to see her again one day. I feel like the thought of the two of them would help me carry on...and I've found, that they gave me something to look forward to, in the future."

"Heh...guess I did a lot of writing after all. This entry took 5 pages..."

"Well, with my newly acquired handicap though, I get the feeling I'll have to do a lot more writing from now on..."

~THE END~